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**CRITICAL ESSAYS
OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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CRITICAL ESSAYS
OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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PREFACE

The texts of the essays in this collection are from authoritative sources, and the occasional omitted passages have been scrupulously indicated. Spelling and punctuation, however, have been normalized to modern usage, and quotations corrected without special remark.

The editor wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the apparatus in Professor Albert S. Cook's editions of Shelley's, Newman's, and Leigh Hunt's essays on poetry.

R. M. A.

Stanford University, California.
January, 1921.

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INTRODUCTION

A new era of criticism, corresponding closely with a new era of poetry, is recognized as having arisen in England at the close of the eighteenth century, being destined to dominate the greater part of the century following. In general this is pretty definitely connected with what is called the Romantic Movement, though that phrase has long been used so vaguely and variously as to be a dangerous one for the practical purposes of a student. Whatever there was in common—despite their many differences—in the poetic theories and practise of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, may no doubt safely be called “romantic”; and this common attitude will be found to be reflected (or, occasionally, opposed) in the criticism of their period.

Another outstanding fact about the criticism of this period is its connection with the development of periodical literature—that is, with certain new types of literary journalism. Two types, to speak more accurately, rose to prominence in the same generation: one that of the great reviews, the other that of the magazine; and each of them gave opportunity for the development of criticism in characteristic ways. Even when, as in the case of the chapters in Coleridge's miscellaneous *Biographia Literaria*, a critic's material first appeared in book form, its substance or tone was often determined by the journalistic criticism of the time.

Since the essays in the present collection deal with countless subjects, suggested by both classic and contemporary writings, it would be absurd to seek for unity of theme, much less of opinion, in the whole group. Yet certain topics recur repeatedly, in significant fashion, or, if not consciously expressed by the writers, are seen at this distance to be implicit in their discussions and to represent significant elements in the literary thinking of the period. Of primary importance is the question

of the nature of poetry, which the age of Wordsworth and Coleridge rightly felt itself to be taking up and answering in certain important and at least partially new ways. Another is the subject of Shakespeare, and the proper means of estimating the value of his works. A third might be viewed as equivalent to the question of "romanticism" itself,—namely, the right to escape from the formal restrictions and prescriptions of an earlier era, and the development of a new and liberal doctrine of the legitimate or "correct" in literary art.

In accordance with this brief survey of the chief significant elements in the criticism of the period, the remainder of this introduction will briefly consider the three topics just noted, and in conclusion the character of the new journalism in which they were so largely embodied.

I.—THE NATURE OF POETRY

The most important aspects of the new doctrine of poetry may be best understood by comparing it with that of the preceding age. In general, the idea of poetry held by criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may be summed up by saying that poetry was then viewed as either *embellished imitation* or *embellished fiction*. The facts of experience were taken by poets, and made more beautiful or more nearly perfect than reality; or, imagined experience was created along the same line of the betterment of nature. If anything further was accomplished, it was by way of commenting upon the poet's materials according to the generalized moral sentiments of the race,—reproducing, in Pope's words, "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." In contrast, the age of Wordsworth viewed poetry primarily as a means of *communicating emotion* by representing not so much the objective facts as the subjective reaction to them, and secondarily, as a means of *interpreting* experiences newly through some penetrative power of the poet which perceived their significance more deeply than was done by ordinary men.

The principal instance of the working out of this idea is found in the new doctrine of the Imagination, as set forth first by Wordsworth and Coleridge, later and more

derivatively by Shelley and Leigh Hunt. In the former period the imagination had been viewed merely as a faculty which called up (like the memory) images of things seen in times past, or, by a creative extension of the process, figured forth "the forms of things unknown" to the experience of any actual eye.¹ But the romantics formed a conception of a faculty which transcended both remembered and created visualization, —one according to which objects and sensations became media for the realization of matters beyond the field of the senses, their inner nature being perceived and interpreted by the poet as his most characteristic function. The student of this subject should lay beside the prose discussions of it Wordsworth's poetized account in *The Prelude*; for example, the address to Coleridge in the 13th Book:

If thou partake the animating faith
That poets, even as prophets, each with each
Connected in a mighty scheme of truth,
Have each his own peculiar faculty,
Heaven's gift, a sense that fits him to perceive
Objects unseen before, thou wilt not blame
The humblest of this band who dares to hope
That unto him hath also been vouchsafed
An insight that in some sort he possesses,
A privilege whereby a work of his,
Proceeding from a source of untaught things,
Creative and enduring, may become
A power like one of Nature's;—

and many related passages. Just who was the first to interpret the term Imagination in this way, and to make the corresponding effort to distinguish it from the Fancy, is uncertain. Wordsworth no doubt derived it originally from Coleridge, and Coleridge from some of the German romantics, notably Jean Paul Richter.² The funda-

¹ Thus Addison, in his famous papers on "The Pleasures of the Imagination," limits his discussion to these things, and (incidentally) to images connected with the visual sense alone.

² The latter, in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1804), has a passage of similar purport, distinguishing *Einbildungskraft* from *Phantasie*. It may be found quoted in the appendix to A. S. Cook's edition of Leigh Hunt's *What is Poetry*, p. 76. See also, for the influence on Coleridge's doctrine of the philosophers Kant and Schelling, the valuable introduction to J. Shawcross's edition of the *Biographia Literaria* (Oxford, 1907).

mental conception was, so to say, in the air: the idea that poetry is *truthful* in a deeper sense than prose or science, and hence is to be viewed, not as a plaything or recreation, but as a serious and philosophic instrument of thought. Of course this was not wholly new; the very words just used, "serious" and "philosophic," or something like them, were applied by Aristotle to poetry in contrast with history, and were repeated a thousand times by the critics of the Renaissance and the neo-classical era. But these critics commonly meant that the superiority of poetry to history consisted in its power to generalize, or to heighten the moral beauty of experience, by freedom from particular fact. The romantics, on the other hand, found it to consist chiefly in the power of individual intensity of insight and feeling.

This emphasis on individual feeling and its value is, naturally enough, another significant element of the doctrine of poetry in the age of Wordsworth. It puts Wordsworth himself among the Rousseauists, different as he is in many respects from those who bear that name with ease. In his account of the typical poet, and in certain accounts of his own writing of particular poems, one sees how he valued the emotional experience as the essence of the poetic act. The formula was simple but far-reaching: first, a stirring of the poet's sensibilities by a worthy cause; then the committal to verse of the "emotion recollected in tranquillity"; then, the awakening of the reader's sensibilities to something corresponding to the poet's experience. If we ask, is the mere stirring of feeling, then, valuable in itself? perhaps Wordsworth does not answer the question explicitly; but he everywhere implies that the emotional experience should be honorable, and in one passage connects the matter of poetic sensibility with sound thinking, which will cause the feelings to "be connected with important subjects." The product, he infers, will be such that by it the reader's affections will be not only "strengthened" but "purified."³ He would very likely, then, have approved Ruskin's later account of poetry as concerned with "noble grounds for the noble emotions." On the other hand, we find in Hazlitt's criticism the more truly Rousseauis-

³ See page 5.

tic indifference to any other values than those of the emotion for its own sake. His whole account of poetry is based on a deliberate exaltation of feeling; and he tells us explicitly that the quality of the feeling does not matter. "Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hatred is poetry; contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness, are all poetry."⁴ And when he quotes Bacon's praise of the divine quality of the art on the ground that "it raises the mind . . . by conforming the shows of things to the desires of the soul," it is not the moral betterment of nature, as commonly understood by the passage, which Hazlitt is thinking of; the illustrations which he seeks make it clear that it is the power of poetry to bring all nature, for the moment, within the compass and thrill of some one dominant feeling.⁵

In Shelley's account, even though the tones of his critical voice resemble Hazlitt's, the moral values of the art again come into their own. Indeed it is in his *Defense*, far more definitely and eloquently than in Coleridge or Wordsworth, that we find them set forth. Here for the first time is presented the romantic union or synthesis of the exaltation of imagination and feeling with ethical good. For Shelley this problem is a simple one; his solution is found summed up in two brief statements. "The great secret of morals is love"; and, "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination."⁶ Devoted to this one great emotion and to this supreme faculty of the soul, poetry ministers to morality by merely existing, without need to take thought for the matter. In general, this view of the proper relationship between creative art and goodness has been the dominant one through the years since Shelley's time.

Of the other accounts of the nature of poetry included in this volume, there is no great need to speak in detail. From Byron's *Letter to Murray*, professedly only a matter of incidental controversy, there emerges a theory of poetry strikingly at odds with that of his great contemporaries, as Byron was agreeably well aware. So far as the main point at issue is concerned, the dispute as to the

⁴ See page 222.

⁵ See page 225.

⁶ See page 285.

relative values of "nature" and "art," no more futile debate was ever engaged in, and it is difficult to say whether Bowles or Byron was the more blind to the childish nature of their arguments. The question whether one subject is itself more "poetic" than another could have been settled by a moment's reference to the Wordsworthian doctrine of poetic feeling,—for it was this that both contestants were really talking about. Byron, professing to despise the romantics and all their works, nevertheless imposed their test upon his own evidence: it was how he himself felt, in viewing a scene, which mattered. But the really significant elements in his Letter, for our purposes, are the incidental signs of the fact that his poetic theory still dwelt in the early eighteenth century. One sign is his contemptuous reference to the imagination, and to the stress laid upon it by his contemporaries; he knows the word still only in the old sense of a means to illusory embellishment, such as "an Irish peasant with a little whiskey in his head" is possessed of.⁷ The same thing is true of his emphasis on the ethical element in poetry; it is not at all that moral worth and beauty with which Wordsworth and Shelley were concerned. For Byron, as for the neo-classicists, literary morality consisted in expressing finely the accumulated conventional wisdom of the race. Hence Pope was worthy of mention by the side of Christ Himself. Why, holding this doctrine, his Lordship should have devoted his own poetry so largely to the portrayal of the unconventional violation of the traditions of his race, this is not the place to inquire.

Newman's essay is another discussion which reads a little like the product of an earlier age. Not in conscious opposition to contemporary opinion, but in serene repose upon the classical sources of critical taste, he gently applied these sources to modern literature with characteristic felicity but without any great penetration or originality. His classicism is shown especially in his emphasis on the "ideal," with the meaning of typical or general,⁸—a notable sign of seventeenth and eighteenth century orthodoxy. Again, his view of the relation of

⁷ See page 269.

⁸ See pages 310-15.

poetry to morality is obviously not so much that of the romantics as it is that of the days of "good sense." Good poetry will be moral because it is soundly reasonable; and "rashness of sentiment" is like "eccentricity of outward conduct"⁹—a foe to that communal wisdom which "oft was thought." All this may be true—probably is true, and is not actually in conflict with the romantic doctrine; but it is by no means the special contribution of the early nineteenth century to the subject.

Leigh Hunt had little of his own to contribute to this—or any—subject, save clarity of temper, grace of manner, and clever illustrative matter drawn from a rich experience in reading. His account of poetry is, then, less original than those of his teachers, but more sweetly reasonable, more systematic, and more fully thought out, applied, and illustrated. It remains one of the best things yet written to set a student thinking about the pleasures of poetry, and to show him how to relate theory to practise. Wordsworth's and Coleridge's doctrine of the imagination, for example, Hunt brought out of the region of dubious metaphysics and psychology in which they had left it, and, making no mystery of it, used it for practical appreciative purposes as an instrument of literary criticism. His quoted examples, too, go further than those of any other writer to give a semblance of clearness to the ever ambiguous distinction between Imagination and Fancy.¹⁰ Hunt's most nearly original contribution to the theory of poetry was that dealing with the place and elements of metrical form. This subject had been touched upon by most of the earlier critics. Wordsworth had introduced it because, in order to maintain his theory that the language of poetry need not differ from that of prose,¹¹ it seemed neces-

⁹ Page 320.

¹⁰ Compare Ruskin's later discussion of the same subject in *Modern Painters*, to the revised (1883) edition of which he prefixed the comment: "The reader must be warned not to trouble himself with the distinctions . . . between Fancy and Imagination. . . . I am myself now entirely indifferent which word I use."

¹¹ See page 9. I have regretfully, for want of space, omitted the discussion of this topic as it appears in Wordsworth's statement of his theory and Coleridge's reply (pages 121-32). In general, one should note its relation to his substitution of the vital relationship between poet and reader for the old one of

sary to explain why, in that case, poetry should take on a different form; and Coleridge, replying to his friend, had gone still more deeply into the matter. Hazlitt threw out some highly interesting remarks on it, emphasizing—as we should expect—the emotional values of rhythm.¹² Shelley fumbled with it, because, wishing to treat the term “poetry” as practically inclusive of all imaginative art, he found metrical form a disturbing differentia, yet was forced to explain why “the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound.”¹³ Leigh Hunt, as usual, avoided the metaphysical difficulties, but affirmed more stoutly than any other writer that every good poet is a good versifier,¹⁴ and proceeded to explain the relationship between the values of metrical form and the corresponding values of poetic style. The results are still valid and suggestive.

II.—SHAKESPEARE

The new Shakespeare criticism is closely connected with the new doctrine of poetry, and, like the latter, can best be understood by contrast with that of the preceding era. As is well known, the eighteenth century editors and critics of Shakespeare found their position a perplexing one. They did not despise or neglect him, as has often been supposed, but they found his admitted greatness paradoxical because in his works the accepted rules of dramatic composition were so generally violated. Hence the conclusion that he was a miraculous exception, a divinely illustrious child of nature, who might be viewed as either ignorant of or exempt from the ordinary laws of art,—therefore not a safe model for any other writer.¹⁵

embellisher and admirer. Since the *fact*, plus the poet's *feeling*, was to produce the desired result, only the simplest language, he believed, was needful to make the proper impression. Later criticism, following Coleridge, has been generally agreed that Wordsworth did not sufficiently take account of the subtle powers of poetic language in communicating both fact and feeling accurately. The student of the subject will find it admirably discussed in Professor Walter Raleigh's *Wordsworth*, chapter iii.

¹² See pages 284-36.

¹³ See pages 281-82.

¹⁴ Page 395.

¹⁵ Compare Coleridge, page 134 below, and Wordsworth in his “*Essay Supplementary*”: “Among us it is a current, I might say

It will be seen that this view is connected, at certain points, with the view of the imagination, held in the same period, as something in contrast and competition with the reason,—a conception according to which reason and imagination were perpetually contending for the mastery, a real work of art appearing when the proper equilibrium was attained. The converse naturally followed: when the imagination was viewed as superior to the reason, or as a deeper form of intellectual penetration, the nature of Shakespeare's powers seemed to be not accidental or paradoxical, but in accord with the profounder laws of composition, apprehended naturally by genius.

Of this doctrine Coleridge was the high priest. That he derived it from Germany, in good part, seems even clearer than in the case of the more general doctrine of the imagination, though we cannot altogether dismiss his earnest protests that he had taught the same things before ever having opportunity to read them in Schlegel.¹⁶ Certainly Schlegel furnished him not only many illustrative details, but what may be regarded as the fundamental analogy for the whole discussion,—the notion that the laws of Shakespeare's art are *organic*, like those of nature, not formal, like those made by man.¹⁷ An organism represents the working out of principles of form determined by its inner nature. One does not gaze upon a sea-monster and say, "This very imperfectly represents my idea of a well-made fish,"—or, if one does, one shows himself to be a classicist, with ideas based on the average limited experience of the past rather than on a conception of the free possibilities of marine life. So with a work of art: if it is a living whole, it may be assumed to be organized according to laws of composition founded in its nature; and to seek to understand these laws is far wiser than to observe that other laws, formulated from other organisms, appear to have been violated. This attitude toward genius, and especially

an established opinion, that Shakespeare is justly praised when he is pronounced to be 'a wild irregular genius, in whom great faults are compensated by great beauties.'

¹⁶ See below, pages 137-55, with the notes.

¹⁷ See page 137, with the note citing Schlegel, where the word "organic" (German *organisch*) appears.

toward Shakespeare, appears not only in Coleridge but in almost all his contemporaries, and became the new orthodoxy of the nineteenth century.

There is, of course, an easily detected fallacy in the "organic" theory. Art is never the product of spontaneous natural law, but is modified both by the deliberate intention of the artist and by the unperceived but inevitable tendencies of his time and place. There are, then, at least two possible sources of fallibility. But the romantics, in their passionate reverence for the greatest of their school, could not conceive of Shakespeare as doing aught of his own motion save for the greater excellence of his art; and they also thought of him as lifted wholly above the tendencies which affected his contemporaries,—a notion, if they had stopped to consider it, inconsistent with their own theory of his work as organically produced. Hence there grew up the doctrine of his perfection or infallibility. This may be seen in its fulness, not, perhaps, in Coleridge,—although he commonly found a way either to justify everything in the Shakespeare text, or, failing in that, to prove that Shakespeare did not write it,¹⁸—but in the mendaciously splendid conclusion of De Quincey's essay "On the Knocking at the Gate."¹⁹ Here we have the whole story in a nutshell: Shakespeare is not like other men, but like nature itself, infallible, unfathomable, transcendent.

A natural corollary was the view of Shakespeare's characters as not like those of ordinary creative artists, but as possessed of a kind of independent and full-rounded existence which made it appropriate to discuss them precisely like actual persons. The critics of the new age do not discuss why Shakespeare *made* Hamlet or Macbeth to act thus and so,—perhaps explaining the problem by

¹⁸ As in the scene of the drunken porter in *Macbeth*, which he believed "to have been written for the mob by some other hand." For his belief in Shakespeare's superhuman powers, see a passage in the seventh lecture of his course on Shakespeare and Milton (1811-12), as reported by Collier: "Shakespeare knew the human mind, and its most minute and intimate workings, and he never introduces a word or a thought in vain or out of place. If we do not understand him, it is our fault or the fault of copyists or typographers. . . . He never wrote at random, or hit upon points of character and conduct by chance; and the smallest fragment of his mind not unfrequently gives a clue to a most perfect, regular, and consistent whole."

¹⁹ Page 327.

the source of the play, the convenience of dramatic technique, or the poet's intellectual or moral purposes; they discuss why Hamlet or Macbeth *did so*, assuming that the answer is as certainly to be found within their characters and past lives as if they had been born and grown to manhood before the time of the writing of the play. In this respect, again, they set the tone of Shakespeare criticism throughout the century. It has been said that Hazlitt was the first thus to treat Shakespeare's characters as real persons, but the practise might well be traced back to Maurice Morgann's famous essay on Falstaff (1777); and both Hazlitt and Lamb were disciples of Coleridge in their general attitude. As for Lamb, it should be noticed how, in paradoxical but penetrating discussion of the tragedies "considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation," he bases his argument on the assumption that these plays are not like those of other dramatists; their art is not merely superior,—it is actually of a different kind. These plays "being in themselves essentially so different from all others,"²⁰ Lamb resents performances in which the pleasure of the audience is of no different character from that awakened by other writers. And there is, of course, just enough truth in his contention to make its critical fruitfulness as certain as its whimsicality.

It must not be supposed that this romantic attitude toward Shakespeare so dominated the period under consideration as to exclude other methods of approach; much less that its fallacious and exaggerated doctrines deprived it of usefulness. To this day we recognize, in the Shakespeare interpretations of Coleridge and his friends, values which show no sign of becoming obsolete,—values primarily due to the newly developed sense of the deeper qualities of the poetic imagination. And Coleridge himself had more than a glimmering conception of the historical method of criticism, which was destined to be the chief contribution of the next age to Shakespeare scholarship. He made use of this method, to be sure, not to explain—as we now do—certain elements in Shakespeare as Elizabethan rather than "for all time," but rather to explain how the classicists' objections (such as to the vio-

²⁰ Page 179.

lation of the unities of place and time) were due to a failure to see such things in historical perspective. It would be too much to expect that he should have anticipated the products of the later era of evolutionary theory, through whose labors we are now able to view Shakespeare intelligently in relation to his age. Nevertheless, Coleridge set forth the principles of Shakespeare interpretation—the relation of historic to appreciative criticism—in a single sentence which is worthy to stand at the head of every work devoted to the subject: “As a living poet must surely write, not for the ages past, but for that in which he lives, and those which are to follow, it is, on the one hand, natural that he should not violate, and on the other, necessary that he should not depend on, the mere manners and modes of his day.”²¹

III.—“CORRECTNESS” AND FREEDOM

Wherever “romantic” tendencies become prominent in criticism, it displays either indifference or hostility to the formal restrictions which influences of another sort have imposed upon the artist. If the preceding age has insisted upon unity of place, or the exact number of five acts, in the drama, the romantic is eager to declare his independence of such commandments; for the formal “heroic” couplet he will seek (like Keats) to substitute one as informal and unheroic as possible. In the period we have to do with, the amount of criticism controversially concerned with these reactions is not large, for the generation immediately preceding had not been dominated by any very imposing authority which it was peculiarly necessary to shake off. Moreover, the interest in drama, commonly the chief battle-ground in such contests of theory, was extremely slight. Nevertheless we must notice some interesting appearances of the expected anti-classical radicalism.

Wordsworth and Coleridge can hardly be said to discuss the subject explicitly; they are too much interested in the positive problems of poetic theory and creation. But in Wordsworth’s account of the relation of poet, critic, and public, in his “Essay Supplementary,” we see the

²¹ Page 140.

essence of the romantic position. Every great original author, he says, "has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." The implication is that he will violate some accepted canon; that the new wine of his genius will burst the old bottles of criticism; hence that the rules or standards of taste must be perpetually revised to fit the progress of creative art. But neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge would have gone to extreme lengths in despising literary tradition.

De Quincey, in some ways the arch-romantic of the age, gives us another incidental exhibit of the protestant position, in a characteristic passage on the relative untrustworthiness of the reason. Let the reader, he exhorts,²² never "pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind." He supports this advice by an illustration of which any schoolboy (as Macaulay would say) could show the fallacy. What he *meant* was that the understanding or reason was not to be allowed to overrule the more naïve perceptions of other faculties, but should take them into account in making its own estimates; or, from another point of view, that, while the reason has its own territory in which to operate, other faculties have theirs. Of these, for him, the imagination is chief. Whatever his exaggerations, one must admit, to the glory of De Quincey, that he has given us perhaps the clearest and most forcible statement in all criticism of the distinction between the characteristic products of the understanding, on the one hand, and those of the imagination and feelings on the other. This is the famous statement respecting "literature of knowledge and literature of power"²³—a passage which sets forth the very *raison d'être* and significance of all literary study.

John Wilson, despite his Toryism in politics, was an ardent defender of freedom in art, and his outbursts on the dogmatism of the classicists (though themselves quite as dogmatic as anything he opposed) are always stimulating. Unfortunately he was too garrulous and miscellaneous to accomplish any single piece of memorable criticism. His amusing attack on the detractors of Spen-

²² Page 323.

²³ Page 340.

ser ²⁴ is one of the best specimens of the free spirit that gladly breaks—and breaks with—all rules.

But it is Macaulay, curiously enough (since he was not at all an arch-romantic, but possessed of much of the "good sense" attitude of the eighteenth century), who represents most brilliantly the case of romanticism against the rules. Incidentally to his account of Byron as a transition poet between the elder age and the new, he launched an attack upon the already dying dragon of "correctness," ²⁵ and summed up the ideas of his own generation on the subject as emphatically as Keats when he cursed the age which had been wedded

To musty laws lined out with wretched rule
And compass vile.²⁶

Macaulay's version of the dogmas of the school of Correctness, as any reader will perceive who pauses to analyze it, is far from just or fair. He seems, for the moment, to have thought that the age of Pope or that of Johnson laid down literary rules as arbitrarily as one fixes the winning score for a game,—just as certain writers of our own time appear to suppose that the traditional rules of Hebrew and Christian morality have no other basis than the arbitrary "Thou shalt not" of the Decalogue. The fact was that the better critics of the neo-classic era always justified the rules by reason and taste, never by arbitrary tradition or authority alone; even Rymer, the worst important example that Macaulay could find, would have told him *why* the hero of a tragedy should be thus and so. But Macaulay had his lawyer's method of misstating the opposite side; and he was of course quite right in renouncing the spirit of dry formalism which an over-emphasis on either reason or tradition always tends to develop. He was also doing good service in pointing out the distinction between correctness in imitative method and correctness in conventional form. The other side of his nature, his unromantic strain of eighteenth-century common sense, is represented in

²⁴ See page 368.

²⁵ See page 346.

²⁶ See the whole passage in Keats's early poem called "Sleep and Poetry."

his swift overthrow of Lamb's defense of Restoration comedy." Here Macaulay saw the fallacy in Lamb's good-natured belief in a world of comic imagination freed from moral implications,—a happy region

Where there ain't no Ten Commandments
And the best is like the worst;—

and in this ethical field he laid down rules of "correctness" as sturdily as Dr. Johnson himself.

IV.—THE REVIEWS

Of the thirty or more essays included, in whole or part, in this collection, at least half appeared first in one or another of the new periodicals which, as has been said, form one of the most important aspects of early nineteenth century criticism. There is no space here to trace the history of these journals, or to discuss their editors and contributors in detail. But we must briefly notice certain aspects of three or four of them which are of outstanding importance for the purpose in hand.

The *Edinburgh Review*, founded 1802, for a long time took its literary tone from Francis Jeffrey, its editor and—for some years—only important reviewer in the field of pure literature. Jeffrey's critical doctrines and tastes have been the despair of every later writer who has tried to reduce them to a formula. Like Byron, he was of both the eighteenth century and the nineteenth. His love for Shakespeare made him a kindred spirit to Coleridge and Hazlitt, and he was not blind to the beauties of Keats; on the other hand he was many parts dogmatist of the old school, and in the very first number of the *Edinburgh* announced his creed in the ominous words: "Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question."²⁷ Most notably, he was totally incapable of appreciating the special qualities of Wordsworth, and the *Edinburgh* soon became notorious among the "lake poets" and their friends for the successive attacks hurled against

²⁷ Pages 359-62.

²⁸ In a review of Southey's *Thalaba*.

that poet's works. Of these the most important, and on the whole the least crabbed and unfair, was the review of *The Excursion*, in 1814.²⁹ It is a characteristic injustice of literary history that Jeffrey should be more largely remembered for his heresy in the matter of Wordsworth than for all the sound and judicious criticism which he wrote. Not only was he not always pugnacious and domineering, but he did much to teach the art of studying a particular author in connection with his age (as in his review of the Works of John Ford) or with some literary problem to which his work gave rise (as in the discussion of popular poetry in the review of *The Lady of the Lake*). Moreover, Jeffrey set the example of a critical style which pretty well balanced the qualities of dignity and vivacity; he could write reviews which would interest equally those concerned for the subject-matter of the works under discussion and those seeking agreeable literary reading. In this way, indeed, the *Edinburgh* really discovered a new type of essay,—that which purported to be a review but earned a right to exist as an independent composition. This is the type known best to everyone in the essays of Macaulay, most of which are book-reviews first of all; and Macaulay was Jeffrey's great pupil, contributor, and successor as *Edinburgh* reviewer.

The *Quarterly Review*, founded 1809, has a somewhat less honorable history than the *Edinburgh*, being born of the demand for a Tory organ which should become as influential as the *Edinburgh* was among Whigs. Ordinarily there is little to choose between partisan organs, at least from a literary standpoint; but in this instance it is fair to recall that the *Edinburgh* did not live, move, and have its being for party purposes (though frankly Whig in its attitude toward parliamentary questions), and also that it did not mix politics with its literary criticism. Jeffrey did not condemn Wordsworth because the poet had become a Tory, nor praise Keats because of any friendship for the radicals. The *Quarterly*, however, especially under its first editor William Gifford, was dis-

²⁹ Page 67. . . Coleridge's indignant reply to this, and to the methods of the *Edinburgh* in general, is to be found in a section of the *Biographia Literaria* (chapter 21) called "Remarks on the present mode of conducting critical journals."

posed to view the social and intellectual community as essentially one, and to test writings of all kinds according as they represented the conservative or the radical spirit. Moreover, Gifford was neither capable himself, nor did he find a leading reviewer who was capable, of treating literary questions in the method of which Jeffrey was master,—acute, often pungent, but sincerely disinterested. Some notable men of letters, to be sure, were at the command of the *Quarterly*, notably Scott and Southey, but neither of these really shone in criticism. Scott was amiable to a fault, and did what he could to modify the savagery of *Quarterly* manners; but much more positive merits than this are necessary to critical distinction. Southey was usually also amiable (except when his moral antipathies were aroused by Byron and his “Satanic” school), besides being both learned and conscientious; but not a single paper of his in the field of literary criticism can be thought memorable. Another prominent contributor was John Wilson Croker, who, from his political associations, would have been thought likely to devote himself to works in that field, but who seems actually to have found most pleasure in invading the field of poetry. Unfortunately for his reputation, the anonymity of his work has been penetrated by the ruthless researches which have attached his name to the *Quarterly*’s ill-famed review of *Endymion*, proving that it was he whom Shelley immortalized as a “deaf and viperous murderer” and a “noteless blot on a remembered name.”³⁰ We no longer believe that this review hastened (much less caused) the death of Keats, and hence can view it more calmly than Croker’s contemporaries. We can see that most of the charges which the reviewer brought against *Endymion* were pretty well justified, and that his fault lay only in a not unnatural blindness to the beauty and promise of the experimental work before him, together with a typical rude pleasure in inflicting pain. This last is a characteristic of anonymous reviewers in all periods, but was at its height of respectability in *Quarterly* circles under Gifford and his successor John Gibson Lockhart. Hazlitt was another of the younger London writers whom the *Quarterly* delighted to maltreat. There was no

³⁰ *Adonais*, stanzas 36-37.

harm in this, for he was himself a reviewer of no very gentle pen, was well able to defend himself, and besides, unlike Keats, was a belligerent radical in politics. When Gifford had made this the excuse to damn his work on Shakespeare, Hazlitt turned upon his assailant in one of the most satisfying pieces of vituperation in the English tongue,—to be found in his *Letter to William Gifford, Esq.* (1819). "There cannot be a greater nuisance," he wrote, "than a dull, envious, pragmatical, low-bred man, who is placed as you are in the situation of the editor of such a work as the *Quarterly Review*. . . . He insults over unsuccessful authors; he hates successful ones. He is angry at the faults of a work, more angry at its excellences. . . . Grown old in the service of corruption, he drivels on to the last with prostituted impotence and shameless effrontery; salves a meagre reputation for wit by venting the dribblets of his spleen and impertinence on others; answers their arguments by confuting himself; mistakes habitual obtuseness of intellect for a particular acuteness, unprincipled rancor for zealous loyalty, and the irritable, discontented, vindictive, peevish effusions of bodily pain and mental imbecility for proofs of refinement of taste and strength of understanding." This was how the *Quarterly* appeared in the circles of those who had felt its lash.

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, founded 1817, was primarily, as its name indicates, not a review, and did not devote its columns to criticism in any large measure. But its publisher and chief contributors were Tories, and young John Lockhart in particular (a Blackwood senechal until he assumed the editorship of the *Quarterly* in 1825) was always eager to castigate the follies of those of other schools. It is probably to Lockhart's pen that we are to attribute the disgraceful series of papers on "The Cockney School,"³¹ which without provocation maligned the group of London poets of which Leigh Hunt was at the time the leading spirit. Hunt and his brother were notorious radicals, and *Blackwood's* was pleased to find in his poetry—and that of his friends—the moral and literary faults which were to be expected of such rascals. One sentence gives the clue to the attack: "His

³¹ See page 165.

works exhibit no reverence either for God or man; neither altar nor throne have any dignity in his eyes." Hunt would perhaps have acknowledged the truth of the second clause, but did not view God and altar, or man and throne, as synonyms. The *Endymion* paper, in this series, is a continuation of that on Hunt, and it will be seen that it was Keats's friendship for the older poet that brought him within range of Lockhart's blows. His chief poetic offense may have been found not in *Endymion*, but in the verses called "Sleep and Poetry," published a year earlier, in which he had declared war on the schools of Pope and Boileau. This was enough in itself to ally him with the enemies of altar and throne.

Critical violence of this sort seems now strangely—and happily—far away. Modern reviewing leaves much to be desired; but it would be difficult now to find a journal of position which should deliberately damn a young poet because of his political friendships, or undertake in general to mingle social, personal, and literary considerations in the blustering confusion displayed by the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's*. Nor is there any critic living who, by calling names and uttering sound and fury, can seriously injure the prospects of any promising writer, howsoever obscure or humble he may be.

It remains to note that the further development of the magazine, in both Scotland and England, gave increased opportunity for the growth of the critical essay of a type more popular than that developed by the reviews. The *London Magazine*, founded 1820, had a particularly brilliant list of contributors, among whom easily the chief were DeQuincey and Lamb. Both these writers were aloof from the controversies that darkened the air in more worldly regions than those where their minds dwelt, and at their best they showed the possibilities of disinterested criticism—criticism which sometimes exhibits the imaginative merits of poetry—in ways that led forward to the finest work of the next age.

RAYMOND M. ALDEN.

CRITICAL ESSAYS OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

PREFACE TO THE LYRICAL BALLADS

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

[The first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared in 1798, but the Preface was written for that of 1800. In later volumes of Wordsworth's poems it appeared in the Appendix. For comments on the controversies to which it gave rise, see Coleridge's remarks, pages 112-13, and De Quincey's, page 328.]

The first volume of these poems has already been submitted to general perusal. It was published as an experiment, which I hoped might be of some use to ascertain how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavor to impart.

I had formed no very inaccurate estimate of the probable effect of those poems: I flattered myself that they who should be pleased with them would read them with more than common pleasure: and, on the other hand, I was well aware that by those who should dislike them they would be read with more than common dislike. The result has differed from my expectation in this only, that a greater number have been pleased than I ventured to hope I should please.

Several of my friends are anxious for the success of these poems, from a belief that, if the views with which they were composed were indeed realized, a class of poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind

permanently, and not unimportant in the quality and in the multiplicity of its moral relations: and on this account they have advised me to prefix a systematic defence of the theory upon which the poems were written. But I was unwilling to undertake the task, knowing that on this occasion the reader would look coldly upon my arguments, since I might be suspected of having been principally influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of *reasoning* him into an approbation of these particular poems; and I was still more unwilling to undertake the task, because adequately to display the opinions, and fully to enforce the arguments, would require a space wholly disproportionate to a preface. For to treat the subject with the clearness and coherence of which it is susceptible, it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved; which, again, could not be determined, without pointing out in what manner language and the human mind act and re-act on each other, and without retracing the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself. I have therefore altogether declined to enter regularly upon this defence; yet I am sensible that there would be something like impropriety in abruptly obtruding upon the public, without a few words of introduction, poems so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed.

It is supposed that by the act of writing in verse an author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association; that he not only thus apprises the reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded. This exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must in different eras of literature have excited very different expectations: for example, in the age of Catullus, Terence, and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope. I will not take upon me to determine the exact import of the promise which, by the act of writing in verse, an author in the present day makes to his reader; but it will undoubtedly

appear to many persons that I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted. They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. I hope, therefore, the reader will not censure me for attempting to state what I have proposed to myself to perform; and also (as far as the limits of a preface will permit) to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined me in the choice of my purpose: that at least he may be spared any unpleasant feeling of disappointment, and that I myself may be protected from one of the most dishonorable accusations which can be brought against an author; namely, that of an indolence which prevents him from endeavoring to ascertain what is his duty, or, when his duty is ascertained, prevents him from performing it.

The principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect;¹ and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coëxist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate

¹ Compare Coleridge's account of the *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 105.

from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men; and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.²

I cannot, however, be insensible to the present outcry against the triviality and meanness, both of thought and language, which some of my contemporaries have occasionally introduced into their metrical compositions; and I acknowledge that this defect, where it exists, is more dishonorable to the writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation, though I should contend at the same time that it is far less pernicious in the sum of its consequences. From such verses the poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy *purpose*. Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*.

² It is worth while here to observe that the affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day. [Wordsworth's note.]

If this opinion be erroneous, I can have little right to the name of a poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

It has been said that each of these poems has a purpose. Another circumstance must be mentioned which distinguishes these poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.

A sense of false modesty shall not prevent me from asserting that the reader's attention is pointed to this mark of distinction, far less for the sake of these particular poems than from the general importance of the subject. The subject is indeed important! For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me that to endeavor to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. For a multitude of causes,

unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies,³ and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble endeavor made in these volumes to counteract it; and, reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dishonorable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible; and were there not added to this impression a belief that the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed, by men of greater powers, and with far more distinguished success.

Having dwelt thus long on the subjects and aim of these poems, I shall request the reader's permission to apprise him of a few circumstances relating to their *style*, in order, among other reasons, that he may not censure me for not having performed what I never attempted. The reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes, and are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural

³ Wordsworth probably has in mind some of the plays of Kotzebue, and perhaps early plays of Schiller's and Goethe's, all of which had exerted some influence in England.

or regular part of that language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but have endeavored utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which writers in meter seem to lay claim to by prescription. I have wished to keep the reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him. Others who pursue a different track will interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, but wish to prefer a claim of my own. There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction;⁴ as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men; and further, because the pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry. Without being culpably particular, I do not know how to give my reader a more exact notion of the style in which it was my wish and intention to write, than by informing him that I have at all times endeavored to look steadily at my subject; consequently there is, I hope, in these poems little falsehood of description, and my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance. Something must have been gained by this practice, as it is friendly to one property of all good poetry, namely, good sense: but it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets. I have also thought it expedient to restrict myself still further, having abstained

⁴In an appendix to the Preface, Wordsworth explained his use of the term "poetic diction." "The earliest poets of all nations generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and as men: feeling powerfully, as they did, their language was daring, and figurative. In succeeding times, poets, and men ambitious of the fame of poets, perceiving the influence of such language, and desirous of producing the same effect without being animated by the same passion, set themselves to a mechanical adoption of these figures of speech, and made use of them, sometimes with propriety, but much more frequently applied them to feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connection whatsoever. A language was thus insensibly produced, differing materially from the real language of men in any situation."

from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad poets, till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower.

If in a poem there should be found a series of lines, or even a single line, in which the language, though naturally arranged, and according to the strict laws of meter, does not differ from that of prose, there is a numerous class of critics, who, when they stumble upon these prosaisms, as they call them, imagine that they have made a notable discovery, and exult over the poet as over a man ignorant of his own profession. Now these men would establish a canon of criticism which the reader will conclude he must utterly reject, if he wishes to be pleased with these volumes. And it would be a most easy task to prove to him that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the meter, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written. The truth of this assertion might be demonstrated by innumerable passages from almost all the poetical writings, even of Milton himself. To illustrate the subject in a general manner, I will here adduce a short composition of Gray, who was at the head of those who, by their reasonings, have attempted to widen the space of separation betwixt prose and metrical composition, and was more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction.

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,
 And reddening Phœbus lifts his golden fire:
 The birds in vain their amorous descant join,
 Or cheerful fields resume their green attire.
 These ears, alas! for other notes repine;
A different object do these eyes require;
My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;
And in my breast the imperfect joys expire;
 Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,
 And new-born pleasure brings to happier men;

The fields to all their wonted tribute bear;
 To warm their little loves the birds complain.
I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain.⁵

It will easily be perceived, that the only part of this sonnet which is of any value is the lines printed in italics; it is equally obvious that, except in the rhyme, and in the use of the single word "fruitless" for fruitlessly, which is so far a defect, the language of these lines does in no respect differ from that of prose.

By the foregoing quotation it has been shown that the language of prose may yet be well adapted to poetry; and it was previously asserted that a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good prose. We will go further. It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. We are fond of tracing the resemblance between poetry and painting, and, accordingly, we call them sisters: but where shall we find bonds of connection sufficiently strict to typify the affinity betwixt metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred, and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree; poetry⁶ sheds no tears "such as angels weep," but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from

⁵ This sonnet was written in 1742, "on the Death of Richard West."

⁶ I here use the word Poetry (though against my own judgment) as opposed to the word Prose, and synonymous with metrical composition. But much confusion has been introduced into criticism by this contradistinction of poetry and prose, instead of the more philosophical one of Poetry and Matter of Fact, or Science. The only strict antithesis to Prose is Metre; nor is this, in truth, a *strict* antithesis, because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose, that it would be scarcely possible to avoid them, even were it desirable. [Wordsworth's note. Compare Coleridge, in his fragment "On the Principles of Genial Criticism concerning the Fine Arts": "The common essence of all [the fine arts] consists in the excitement of emotion for the immediate purpose of pleasure through the medium of beauty; herein contra-distinguishing poetry from science, the immediate object and primary purpose of which is truth and possible utility." See also the similar passage on p. 108.]

those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

If it be affirmed that rhyme and metrical arrangement of themselves constitute a distinction which overturns what has just been said on the strict affinity of metrical language with that of prose, and paves the way for other artificial distinctions which the mind voluntarily admits, I answer that the language of such poetry as is here recommended is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and, if meter be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind. What other distinction would we have? Whence is it to come? And where is it to exist? Not, surely, where the poet speaks through the mouths of his characters: it cannot be necessary here, either for elevation of style, or any of its supposed ornaments: for, if the poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures. I forbear to speak of an incongruity which would shock the intelligent reader, should the poet interweave any foreign splendor of his own with that which the passion naturally suggests: it is sufficient to say that such addition is unnecessary. And surely it is more probable that those passages which with propriety abound with metaphors and figures will have their due effect, if, upon other occasions where the passions are of a milder character, the style also be subdued and temperate.

But as the pleasure which I hope to give by the poems now presented to the reader must depend entirely on just notions upon this subject, and as it is in itself of high importance to our taste and moral feelings, I cannot content myself with these detached remarks. And if, in what I am about to say, it shall appear to some that my labor is unnecessary, and that I am like a man fighting a

battle without enemies, such persons may be reminded that, whatever be the language outwardly holden by men, a practical faith in the opinions which I am wishing to establish is almost unknown. If my conclusions are admitted, and carried as far as they must be carried if admitted at all, our judgments concerning the works of the greatest poets both ancient and modern will be far different from what they are at present, both when we praise, and when we censure; and our moral feelings influencing and influenced by these judgments will, I believe, be corrected and purified.

Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, let me ask, what is meant by the word Poet? What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?—He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves:—whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

But whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt that the language which it will suggest to him must often,

in liveliness and truth, fall short of that which is uttered by men in real life under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself.

However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a poet, it is obvious that while he describes and imitates passions, his employment is in some degree mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes,—nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. Here, then, he will apply the principle of selection which has been already insisted upon. He will depend upon this for removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion; he will feel that there is no necessity to trick out or to elevate nature: and, the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words which *his* fancy or imagination can suggest will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.

But it may be said by those who do not object to the general spirit of these remarks, that, as it is impossible for the poet to produce upon all occasions language as exquisitely fitted for the passion as that which the real passion itself suggests, it is proper that he should consider himself as in the situation of a translator, who does not scruple to substitute excellencies of another kind for those which are unattainable by him, and endeavors occasionally to surpass his original, in order to make some amends for the general inferiority to which he feels that he must submit. But this would be to encourage idleness and unmanly despair. Further, it is the language of men who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of poetry as of a matter of amusement and idle pleasure; who will converse with us as gravely about a *taste* for poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontiniac

or Sherry.⁷ Aristotle, I have been told, has said that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing:⁸ it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature. The obstacles which stand in the way of the fidelity of the biographer and historian, and of their consequent utility, are incalculably greater than those which are to be encountered by the poet who comprehends the dignity of his art. The poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a man. Except this one restriction, there is no object standing between the poet and the image of things; between this, and the biographer and historian, there are a thousand.

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere, because not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and

⁷In his "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" Wordsworth further developed his objection to the term *taste*. "It is a metaphor taken from a *passive* sense of the human body, and transferred to things which are in their essence *not* passive,—to intellectual acts and operations. . . . The profound and universal in thought and imagination,—or, in ordinary language, the pathetic and the sublime,—are neither of them, accurately speaking, objects of a faculty which could ever without a sinking in the spirit of nations have been designated by the metaphor *taste*."

⁸"Poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." (Aristotle's *Poetics*, chap. ix.)

carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure. We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The man of science, the chemist and mathematician, whatever difficulties and disgusts they may have had to struggle with, know and feel this. However painful may be the objects with which the anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge. What then does the poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions, which from habit acquire the quality of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding everywhere objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an over-balance of enjoyment.

To this knowledge which all men carry about with them, and to these sympathies in which, without any other discipline than that of our daily life, we are fitted to take delight, the poet principally directs his attention. He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature. And thus the poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure, which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature, with affections akin to those which, through labor and length of time, the man of science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies. The knowledge both of the poet and the man of science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The man of science seeks truth as a

remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science. Emphatically may it be said of the poet, as Shakespeare hath said of man, that "he looks before and after."⁹ He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favorite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man. If the labors of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will

⁹ *Hamlet*, IV, iv, 37.

welcome the being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.—It is not, then, to be supposed that any one who holds that sublime notion of poetry which I have attempted to convey, will break in upon the sanctity and truth of his pictures by transitory and accidental ornaments, and endeavor to excite admiration of himself by arts the necessity of which must manifestly depend upon the assumed meanness of his subject.

What has been thus far said applies to poetry in general, but especially to those parts of composition where the poet speaks through the mouths of his characters; and upon this point it appears to authorize the conclusion that there are few persons of good sense who would not allow that the dramatic parts of composition are defective, in proportion as they deviate from the real language of nature, and are colored by a diction of the poet's own, either peculiar to him as an individual poet or belonging simply to poets in general,—to a body of men who, from the circumstance of their compositions being in meter, it is expected will employ a particular language.

It is not, then, in the dramatic parts of composition that we look for this distinction of language; but still it may be proper and necessary where the poet speaks to us in his own person and character. To this I answer by referring the reader to the description before given of a poet. Among the qualities there enumerated as principally conducing to form a poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree. The sum of what was said is, that the poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and

resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the poet describes, as they are the sensations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be *proved* that it is impossible. But supposing that this were not the case, the poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself. But poets do not write for poets alone, but for men. Unless, therefore, we are advocates for that admiration which subsists upon ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand, the poet must descend from this supposed height; and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves. To this it may be added that while he is only selecting from the real language of men, or, which amounts to the same thing, composing accurately in the spirit of such selection, he is treading upon safe ground, and we know what we are to expect from him. Our feelings are the same with respect to meter; for, as it may be proper to remind the reader, the distinction of meter is regular and uniform, and not, like that which is produced by what is usually called POETIC DICTION, arbitrary, and subject to infinite caprices upon which no calculation whatever can be made. In the one case, the reader is utterly at the mercy of the poet, respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion; whereas in the other, the meter obeys certain laws, to which the poet and reader both willingly submit because they are certain, and because no interference is made by them with the passion, but such as the concurring testimony of ages has shown to heighten and improve the pleasure which co-exists with it.

It will now be proper to answer an obvious question, namely, Why, professing these opinions, have I written in verse? To this, in addition to such answer as is included in what has been already said, I reply, in the first place, Because, however I may have restricted myself,

there is still left open to me what confessedly constitutes the most valuable object of all writing, whether in prose or verse—the great and universal passions of men, the most general and interesting of their occupations, and the entire world of nature before me—to supply endless combinations of forms and imagery. Now, supposing for a moment that whatever is interesting in these objects may be as vividly described in prose, why should I be condemned for attempting to superadd to such description the charm which, by the consent of all nations, is acknowledged to exist in metrical language? To this, by such as are yet unconvinced, it may be answered that a very small part of the pleasure given by poetry depends upon the meter, and that it is injudicious to write in meter, unless it be accompanied with the other artificial distinctions of style with which meter is usually accompanied, and that, by such deviation, more will be lost from the shock which will thereby be given to the reader's associations than will be counterbalanced by any pleasure which he can derive from the general power of numbers. In answer to those who still contend for the necessity of accompanying meter with certain appropriate colors of style in order to the accomplishment of its appropriate end, and who also, in my opinion, greatly underrate the power of meter in itself, it might, perhaps, as far as relates to these volumes, have been almost sufficient to observe that poems are extant, written upon more humble subjects, and in a still more naked and simple style, which have continued to give pleasure from generation to generation. Now if nakedness and simplicity be a defect, the fact here mentioned affords a strong presumption that poems somewhat less naked and simple are capable of affording pleasure at the present day; and what I wished *chiefly* to attempt, at present, was to justify myself for having written under the impression of this belief.

But various causes might be pointed out why, when the style is manly, and the subject of some importance, words metrically arranged will long continue to impart such a pleasure to mankind as he who proves the extent of that pleasure will be desirous to impart. The end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an

overbalance of pleasure; but, by the supposition, excitement is an unusual and irregular state of the mind; ideas and feelings do not, in that state, succeed each other in accustomed order. If the words, however, by which this excitement is produced be in themselves powerful, or the images and feelings have an undue proportion of pain connected with them, there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds. Now the co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed in various moods and in a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling, and of feeling not strictly and necessarily connected with the passion. This is unquestionably true; and hence, though the opinion will at first appear paradoxical, from the tendency of meter to divest language, in a certain degree, of its reality, and thus to throw a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition, there can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose. The meter of the old ballads is very artless, yet they contain many passages which would illustrate this opinion; and, I hope, if the following poems be attentively perused, similar instances will be found in them. This opinion may be further illustrated by appealing to the reader's own experience of the reluctance with which he comes to the reperusal of the distressful parts of *Clarissa Harlowe*, or *The Gamester*,¹⁰ while Shakespeare's writings, in the most pathetic scenes, never act upon us, as pathetic, beyond the bounds of pleasure—an effect which, in a much greater degree than might at first be imagined, is to be

¹⁰ *Clarissa*, a tragic novel by Richardson, published 1748; *The Gamester*, a domestic tragedy by Edward Moore, 1753. With the theory of meter as relieving tragic pain, compare a remark of Goethe's in a letter to Schiller (May 5, 1798), at the time when he was composing *Faust*: "Certain tragic scenes were written in prose, but they are quite intolerable compared with the others, through their naturalness and strength. I am trying, therefore, to put them into rhyme, for then the idea is seen as if through a veil, and the direct impression of the tremendous material is softened."

ascribed to small but continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement.—On the other hand (what it must be allowed will much more frequently happen), if the poet's words should be incommensurate with the passion, and inadequate to raise the reader to a height of desirable excitement, then (unless the poet's choice of his meter has been grossly injudicious) in the feelings of pleasure which the reader has been accustomed to connect with meter in general, and in the feeling, whether cheerful or melancholy, which he has been accustomed to connect with that particular movement of meter, there will be found something which will greatly contribute to impart passion to the words, and to effect the complex end which the poet proposes to himself.

If I had undertaken a SYSTEMATIC defence of the theory here maintained, it would have been my duty to develop the various causes upon which the pleasure received from metrical language depends. Among the chief of these causes is to be reckoned a principle which must be well known to those who have made any of the arts the object of accurate reflection; namely, the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it, take their origin: it is the life of our ordinary conversation; and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings. It would not be a useless employment to apply this principle to the consideration of meter, and to show that meter is hence enabled to afford much pleasure, and to point out in what manner that pleasure is produced. But my limits will not permit me to enter upon this subject, and I must content myself with a general summary.

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before

the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment. If Nature be thus cautious to preserve in a state of enjoyment a being so employed, the poet ought to profit by the lesson held forth to him, and ought especially to take care that, whatever passions he communicates to his reader, those passions, if his reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or meter of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of meter, differing from it so widely—all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. This effect is always produced in pathetic and impassioned poetry; while in lighter compositions the ease and gracefulness with which the poet manages his numbers are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the reader. All that it is *necessary* to say, however, upon this subject, may be effected by affirming, what few persons will deny, that of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once.

Having thus explained a few of my reasons for writing in verse, and why I have chosen subjects from common life, and endeavored to bring my language near to the real language of men, if I have been too minute in pleading my own cause, I have at the same time been treating a subject of general interest; and for this reason a few

words shall be added with reference solely to these particular poems, and to some defects which will probably be found in them. I am sensible that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance, I may have sometimes written upon unworthy subjects; but I am less apprehensive on this account, than that my language may frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself. Hence I have no doubt that, in some instances, feelings, even of the ludicrous, may be given to my readers by expressions which appeared to me tender and pathetic. Such faulty expressions, were I convinced they were faulty at present, and that they must necessarily continue to be so, I would willingly take all reasonable pains to correct. But it is dangerous to make these alterations on the simple authority of a few individuals, or even of certain classes of men; for where the understanding of an author is not convinced, or his feelings altered, this cannot be done without great injury to himself: for his own feelings are his stay and support; and, if he set them aside in one instance, he may be induced to repeat this act till his mind shall lose all confidence in itself, and become utterly debilitated. To this it may be added that the critic ought never to forget that he is himself exposed to the same errors as the poet, and perhaps in a much greater degree: for there can be no presumption in saying of most readers that it is not probable they will be so well acquainted with the various stages of meaning through which words have passed, or with the fickleness or stability of the relations of particular ideas to each other; and, above all, since they are so much less interested in the subject, they may decide lightly and carelessly.

Long as the reader has been detained, I hope he will permit me to caution him against a mode of false criticism which has been applied to poetry, in which the language closely resembles that of life and nature. Such verses have been triumphed over in parodies, of which Dr. Johnson's stanza is a fair specimen:—

I put my hat upon my head
And walked into the Strand,
And there I met another man
Whose hat was in his hand.¹¹

Immediately under these lines let us place one of the most justly admired stanzas of the "Babes in the Wood."¹²

These pretty babes with hand in hand
Went wandering up and down;
But never more they saw the man
Approaching from the town.

In both these stanzas the words, and the order of the words, in no respect differ from the most unimpassioned conversation. There are words in both, for example, "the Strand," and "the town," connected with none but the most familiar ideas; yet the one stanza we admit as admirable, and the other as a fair example of the superlatively contemptible. Whence arises this difference? Not from the meter, not from the language, not from the order of the words; but the *matter* expressed in Dr. Johnson's stanza is contemptible. The proper method of treating trivial and simple verses to which Dr. Johnson's stanza would be a fair parallelism, is not to say, This is a bad kind of poetry, or This is not poetry; but, This wants sense; it is neither interesting in itself, nor can *lead* to anything interesting; the images neither originate in that sane state of feeling which arises out of thought, nor can excite thought or feeling in the reader. This is the only sensible manner of dealing with such verses. Why trouble yourself about the species till you have previously decided upon the genus? Why take pains to prove that an ape is not a Newton, when it is self-evident that he is not a man?

One request I must make of my reader, which is, that in judging these poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others. How common is it to

¹¹ This stanza was recorded in the Memoirs of Joseph Cradock, as having been composed by Dr. Johnson in imitation of the style of Percy's ballad, "The Hermit of Warkworth."

¹² A popular ballad, of the comparatively modern type, which Addison had highly praised in the 85th *Spectator*.

hear a person say, I myself do not object to this style of composition, or this or that expression, but to such and such classes of people it will appear mean or ludicrous! This mode of criticism, so destructive of all sound unadulterated judgment, is almost universal: let the reader then abide, independently, by his own feelings, and, if he finds himself affected, let him not suffer such conjectures to interfere with his pleasure.

If an author, by any single composition, has impressed us with respect for his talents, it is useful to consider this as affording a presumption that on other occasions, where we have been displeased, he nevertheless may not have written ill or absurdly; and further, to give him so much credit for this one composition as may induce us to review what has displeased us with more care than we should otherwise have bestowed upon it. This is not only an act of justice, but, in our decisions upon poetry especially, may conduce in a high degree to the improvement of our own taste; for an *accurate* taste in poetry, and in all the other arts, as Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed,¹³ is an *acquired* talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long-continued intercourse with the best models of composition. This is mentioned, not with so ridiculous a purpose as to prevent the most inexperienced reader from judging for himself (I have already said that I wish him to judge for himself), but merely to temper the rashness of decision, and to suggest that, if poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous; and that, in many cases, it necessarily will be so.

Nothing would, I know, have so effectually contributed to further the end which I have in view, as to have shown of what kind the pleasure is, and how that pleasure is produced, which is confessedly produced by metrical composition essentially different from that which I have here endeavored to recommend: for the reader will say that he has been pleased by such composition; and what more can be done for him? The power of any art is limited; and he will suspect that, if it be proposed to furnish him with new friends, that can be only upon condition of his

¹³ For Reynolds's account of Taste, see the seventh of his Discourses before the Royal Academy.

abandoning his old friends. Besides, as I have said, the reader is himself conscious of the pleasure which he has received from such composition, composition to which he has peculiarly attached the endearing name of poetry; and all men feel an habitual gratitude, and something of an honorable bigotry, for the objects which have long continued to please them: we not only wish to be pleased, but to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased. There is in these feelings enough to resist a host of arguments; and I should be the less able to combat them successfully, as I am willing to allow that, in order entirely to enjoy the poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed. But, would my limits have permitted me to point out how this pleasure is produced, many obstacles might have been removed, and the reader assisted in perceiving that the powers of language are not so limited as he may suppose; and that it is possible for poetry to give other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature. This part of the subject has not been altogether neglected, but it has not been so much my present aim to prove that the interest excited by some other kinds of poetry is less vivid, and less worthy of the nobler powers of the mind, as to offer reasons for presuming that, if my purpose were fulfilled, a species of poetry would be produced which is genuine poetry, in its nature well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations.

From what has been said, and from a perusal of the poems, the reader will be able clearly to perceive the object which I had in view: he will determine how far it has been attained; and, what is a much more important question, whether it be worth attaining: and upon the decision of these two questions will rest my claim to the approbation of the public.

LETTER TO JOHN WILSON

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

[In May, 1802, John Wilson, then only seventeen years of age, wrote an interesting letter to Wordsworth, with whom he had no personal acquaintance, in praise of the *Lyrical Ballads*. By adhering "strictly to natural feelings," and describing "what comes within the range of every person's observation," Wordsworth (wrote Wilson) had "surpassed every poet both of ancient and modern times." To a few poems, however, he objected on the ground that "no feeling . . . ought to become the subject of poetry, that does not please"; and in particular he instanced "The Idiot Boy." "The affection of Betty Foy has nothing in it to excite interest. It exhibits merely the effects of that instinctive feeling inherent in the constitution of every animal. The excessive fondness of the mother disgusts us, and prevents us from sympathizing with her. We are unable to enter into her feelings; we cannot conceive ourselves actuated by the same feelings, and consequently take little or no interest in her situation. . . . To me it appears almost unnatural, that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother. This much I know, that among all the people ever I knew to have read this poem, I never met one who did not rise rather displeased from the perusal of it, and the only cause I could assign for it was the one now mentioned. . . . You never deviate from nature; in you that would be impossible; but in this case you have delineated feelings which, though natural, do not please, but which create a certain degree of disgust and contempt." (See the whole letter in Knight's *Life of Wordsworth*, i, 390-97.) The following selection is that portion of Wordsworth's reply which has to do with his theory of poetry and Wilson's objections.]

. . . You begin what you say upon the "Idiot Boy" with this observation, that nothing is a fit subject for poetry which does not please. But here follows a question, Does not please whom? Some have little knowledge of natural imagery of any kind, and, of course, little relish for it; some are disgusted with the very mention of the words pastoral poetry, sheep or shepherds. Some cannot tolerate a poem with a ghost or any supernatural agency in it; others would shrink from an animated de-

scription of the pleasures of love, as from a thing carnal and libidinous. Some cannot bear to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions of society, because their vanity and self-love tell them that these belong only to themselves, and men like themselves in dress, station, and way of life; others are disgusted with the naked language of some of the most interesting passions of men, because either it is indelicate, or gross, or vulgar. Many fine ladies could not bear certain expressions in "The Mother" and "The Thorn," and, as in the instance of Adam Smith,—who, we are told, could not endure the ballad of "Clym of the Clough,"—because the author had not written like a gentleman. Then there are professional and national prejudices for evermore. Some take no interest in the description of a particular passion or quality, as love of solitariness, we will say, genial activity of fancy, love of nature, religion, and so forth, because they have [little or] nothing of it in themselves; and so on without end. I return then to [the] question: "Please whom? or what?" I answer, Human Nature as it has been [and ever] will be. But where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, from within; by stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves to those men who lead the simplest lives, and most according to Nature; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who, having known these things, have outgrown them. This latter class is the most to be depended upon, but it is very small in number.

People in our rank of life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that Human Nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same thing. Whom do we generally associate with? Gentlemen, persons of fortune, professional men, ladies, persons who can afford to buy or can easily procure books of half-a-guinea price, hot-pressed, and printed upon superfine paper. These persons are, it is true, a part of Human Nature, but we err lamentably if we suppose them to be fair representatives of the vast mass of human existence. And yet few ever consider books but with reference to their power of pleasing these persons, and men

of a higher rank; few descend lower, among cottages and fields, and among children. A man must have done this habitually before his judgment upon "The Idiot Boy" would be in any way decisive with me. I *know* I have done this myself habitually; I wrote the poem with exceeding delight and pleasure, and whenever I read it I read it with pleasure. You have given me praise for having reflected faithfully in my poems the feelings of human nature. I would fain hope that I have done so. But a great poet ought to do more than this: he ought, to a certain degree, to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, in short, more consonant to Nature, that is, to Eternal Nature and the great moving spirit of things. He ought to travel before men occasionally, as well as at their sides. I may illustrate this by a reference to natural objects. What false notions have prevailed from generation to generation of the true character of the nightingale. As far as my friend's poem,¹ in the *Lyrical Ballads*, is read, it will contribute greatly to rectify these. You will recollect a passage in Cowper, where, speaking of rural sounds, he says:

And *even* the boding owl
That hails the rising moon has charms for me.²

Cowper was passionately fond of natural objects, yet you see he mentions it as a marvelous thing that he could connect pleasure with the cry of the owl. In the same poem he speaks in the same manner of that beautiful plant, the gorse; making in some degree an amiable boast of his loving it, "unsightly" and unsmooth as it is. There are many aversions of this kind, which, though they may have some foundation in nature, have yet so slight a one that—though they may have prevailed hundreds of years—a philosopher will look upon them as accidents. So with respect to many moral feelings, either of love or dislike. What excessive admiration was paid on former times to personal prowess and military success! It is so with the latter even at the present day, but surely not

¹ Coleridge's "The Nightingale."

² From *The Task*, i. 205.

nearly so much as heretofore. So with regard to birth, and innumerable other modes of sentiment, civil and religious. But you will be inclined to ask by this time how all this applies to "The Idiot Boy." To this I can only say that the loathing and disgust which many people have at the sight of an idiot is a feeling which, though having some foundation in human nature, is not necessarily attached to it in any virtuous degree, but is owing in a great measure to a false delicacy, and, if I may say it without rudeness, a certain want of comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling. Persons in the lower classes of society have little or nothing of this. If an idiot is born in a poor man's house, it must be taken care of, and cannot be boarded out as it would be by gentlefolks, or sent to a public or private receptacle for such unfortunate beings.

I often applied to idiots, in my own mind, that sublime impression of Scripture that "their life is hidden with God." They are worshiped, probably from a feeling of this sort, in several parts of the East. Among the Alps, where they are numerous, they are considered, I believe, as a blessing to the family to which they belong. I have, indeed, often looked upon the conduct of fathers and mothers of the lower classes of society toward idiots as a great triumph of the human heart. It is there that we see the strength, disinterestedness, and grandeur of love; nor have I ever been able to contemplate an object that calls out so many excellent and virtuous sentiments without finding it hallowed thereby, and having something in me which bears down before it, like a deluge, every feeble sensation of disgust and aversion.

There are, in my opinion, several important mistakes in the latter part of your letter. These refer both to the Boy and the Mother. I must content myself simply with observing that it is probable that the principal cause of your dislike to this particular poem lies in the *word* Idiot. If there had been any such word in our language to which we had attached passion, as lack-wit, half-wit, witless, etc., I should have certainly employed it in preference; but there is no such word. Observe (this is entirely with reference to this particular poem), my Idiot is not one of those who cannot articulate:

Whether in cunning or in joy,
And then his words were not a few, etc.;—

and the last speech at the end of the poem. The Boy whom I had in my mind was by no means disgusting in his appearance, quite the contrary; and I have known several with imperfect faculties who are handsome in their persons and features. There is one, at present, within a mile of my own house, remarkably so, though [he has something] of a stare and vacancy in his countenance. A friend of mine, knowing that some persons had a dislike to the poem, such as you have expressed, advised me to add a stanza describing the person of the Boy [so as] entirely to separate him in the imagination of my readers from that class of idiots who are disgusting in their persons; but the narration in the poem is so rapid and impassioned that I could not find a place in which to insert the stanza without checking the progress of it, and [so leaving] a deadness upon the feeling. This poem has, I know, frequently produced the same effect as it did upon you and your friends; but there are many also to whom it affords exquisite delight, and who, indeed, prefer it to any other of my poems. This proves that the feelings there delineated are such as men *may* sympathize with. This is enough for my purpose. It is not enough for me as a poet to delineate merely such feelings as all men *do* sympathize with; but it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men *may* sympathize with, and such as there is reason to believe they would be better and more moral beings if they did sympathize. . . .

PREFACE TO THE POEMS OF 1815

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

The powers requisite for the production of poetry are: first, those of Observation and Description,—*i.e.*, the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the de-

scriber; whether the things depicted be actually present to the senses, or have a place only in the memory. This power, though indispensable to a poet, is one which he employs only in submission to necessity, and never for a continuance of time; as its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects, much in the same way as a translator or engraver ought to be to his original. 2ndly, Sensibility,—which, the more exquisite it is, the wider will be the range of a poet's perceptions; and the more will he be incited to observe objects, both as they exist in themselves and as reacted upon by his own mind. (The distinction between poetic and human sensibility has been marked in the character of the poet delineated in the original preface.)¹ 3rdly, Reflection,—which makes the poet acquainted with the value of actions, images, thoughts, and feelings, and assists the sensibility in perceiving their connection with each other. 4thly, Imagination and Fancy,—to modify, to create, and to associate. 5thly, Invention,—by which characters are composed out of materials supplied by observation, whether of the poet's own heart and mind, or of external life and nature, and such incidents and situations produced as are most impressive to the imagination, and most fitted to do justice to the characters, sentiments, and passions, which the poet undertakes to illustrate. And, lastly, Judgment,—to decide how and where, and in what degree, each of these faculties ought to be exerted; so that the less shall not be sacrificed to the greater, nor the greater, slighting the less, arrogate, to its own injury, more than its due. By judgment, also, is determined what are the laws and appropriate graces of every species of composition.²

The materials of Poetry, by these powers collected and produced, are cast, by means of various moulds, into divers forms. The moulds may be enumerated, and the forms specified, in the following order. 1st, The Narrative,—including the Epopœia, the Historic Poem, the

¹ See p. 11.

² As sensibility to harmony of numbers, and the power of producing it, are invariably attendants upon the faculties above specified, nothing has been said upon those requisites. [Wordsworth's note.]

Tale, the Romance, the Mock-heroic, and, if the spirit of Homer will tolerate such neighborhood, that dear production of our days, the metrical Novel.³ Of this class, the distinguishing mark is, that the narrator, however liberally his speaking agents be introduced, is himself the source from which everything primarily flows. Epic poets, in order that their mode of composition may accord with the elevation of their subject, represent themselves as *singing* from the inspiration of the Muse, "*Arma virumque cano*";⁴ but this is a fiction, in modern times, of slight value: the *Iliad* or the *Paradise Lost* would gain little in our estimation by being chanted. The other poets who belong to this class are commonly content to *tell* their tale;—so that of the whole it may be affirmed that they neither require nor reject the accompaniment of music.

2ndly, The Dramatic,—consisting of Tragedy, Historic Drama, Comedy, and Masque, in which the poet does not appear at all in his own person, and where the whole action is carried on by speech and dialogue of the agents; music being admitted only incidentally and rarely. The Opera may be placed here, inasmuch as it proceeds by dialogue; though depending, to the degree that it does, upon music, it has a strong claim to be ranked with the lyrical. The characteristic and impassioned Epistle, of which Ovid and Pope have given examples, considered as a species of monodrama,⁵ may, without impropriety, be placed in this class.

3rdly, The Lyrical,—containing the Hymn, the Ode, the Elegy, the Song, and the Ballad; in all which, for the production of their *full* effect, an accompaniment of music is indispensable.

4thly, The Idyllium,—descriptive chiefly either of the processes and appearances of external nature, as the *Seasons* of Thomson; or of characters, manners, and

³ The long narrative poem was a favorite of this period; Scott's chief examples had appeared 1808-13, Byron's 1813-14, Southey's 1801-14.

⁴ "I sing of arms and the man"; the opening words of the *Æneid*.

⁵ A drama with but one speaking character, or what is now commonly called a dramatic monologue. Southey used the term of certain poetical monologues of his, and Tennyson applied it to the series of monologues and lyrics forming *Maud*.

sentiments, as are Shenstone's *Schoolmistress*, *The Cotter's Saturday Night* of Burns, *The Twa Dogs* of the same Author; or of these in conjunction with the appearances of nature, as most of the pieces of Theocritus, the *Allegro* and *Penseroso* of Milton, Beattie's *Minstrel*, Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*. The Epitaph, the Inscription, the Sonnet, most of the epistles of poets writing in their own persons, and all loco-descriptive poetry, belong to this class.

5thly, Didactic,—the principal object of which is direct instruction; as the Poem of Lucretius,⁶ the *Georgics* of Virgil, *The Fleece* of Dyer, Mason's *English Garden*, &c.

And lastly, philosophical Satire, like that of Horace and Juvenal; personal and occasional Satire rarely comprehending sufficient of the general in the individual to be dignified with the name of poetry.

Out of the three last has been constructed a composite order, of which Young's *Night Thoughts* and Cowper's *Task* are excellent examples.

It is deducible from the above, that poems, apparently miscellaneous, may with propriety be arranged either with reference to the powers of mind predominant in the production of them; or to the mould in which they are cast; or, lastly, to the subjects to which they relate. From each of these considerations, the following poems have been divided into classes; which, that the work may more obviously correspond with the course of human life, and for the sake of exhibiting in it the three requisites of a legitimate whole, a beginning, a middle, and an end, have been also arranged, as far as it was possible, according to an order of time, commencing with Childhood, and terminating with Old Age, Death, and Immortality. My guiding wish was, that the small pieces of which these volumes consist, thus discriminated, might be regarded under a two-fold view; as composing an entire work within themselves, and as adjuncts to the philosophical poem, *The Recluse*.⁷ This arrangement has long presented itself habitually to my own mind. Nevertheless, I should

⁶ Called *De Rerum Natura*.

⁷ *The Recluse* was the name of the complete philosophic-autobiographic poem projected by Wordsworth, of which *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, which he completed, were to be parts.

have preferred to scatter the contents of these volumes at random, if I had been persuaded that, by the plan adopted, anything material would be taken from the natural effect of the pieces, individually, on the mind of the unreflecting reader. I trust there is a sufficient variety in each class to prevent this; while, for him who reads with reflection, the arrangement will serve as a commentary unostentatiously directing his attention to my purposes, both particular and general. But, as I wish to guard against the possibility of misleading by this classification, it is proper first to remind the reader that certain poems are placed according to the powers of mind, in the author's conception, predominant in the production of them; *predominant*, which implies the exertion of other faculties in less degree. Where there is more imagination than fancy in a poem, it is placed under the head of imagination, and *vice versâ*. Both the above classes might without impropriety have been enlarged from that consisting of "Poems founded on the Affections"; as might this latter from those, and from the class "proceeding from Sentiment and Reflection." The most striking characteristics of each piece, mutual illustration, variety, and proportion, have governed me throughout.

None of the other classes, except those of Fancy and Imagination, require any particular notice. But a remark of general application may be made. All poets, except the dramatic, have been in the practice of feigning that their works were composed to the music of the harp or lyre: with what degree of affectation this has been done in modern times, I leave to the judicious to determine. For my own part, I have not been disposed to violate probability so far, or to make such a large demand upon the reader's charity. Some of these pieces are essentially lyrical, and therefore cannot have their due force without a supposed musical accompaniment; but, in much the greatest part, as a substitute for the classic lyre or romantic harp, I require nothing more than an animated or impassioned recitation, adapted to the subject. Poems, however humble in their kind, if they be good in that kind, cannot read themselves; the law of long syllable and short must not be so inflexible,—the letter of meter must not be so impassive to the spirit of versification,—as

to deprive the reader of all voluntary power to modulate, in subordination to the sense, the music of the poem;—in the same manner as his mind is left at liberty, and even summoned, to act upon its thoughts and images. But, though the accompaniment of a musical instrument be frequently dispensed with, the true poet does not therefore abandon his privilege distinct from that of the mere proseman;

He murmurs near the running brooks
A music sweeter than their own.

Let us come now to the consideration of the words Fancy and Imagination, as employed in the classification of the following poems. "A man," says an intelligent author, "has imagination in proportion as he can distinctly copy in the idea the impressions of sense: it is the faculty which *images* within the mind the phenomena of sensation. A man has fancy in proportion as he can call up, connect, or associate, at pleasure, those internal images (*φαντάζειν* is to cause to appear) so as to complete ideal representations of absent objects. Imagination is the power of depicting, and fancy of evoking and combining. The imagination is formed by patient observation; the fancy by a voluntary activity in shifting the scenery of the mind. The more accurate the imagination, the more safely may a painter, or a poet, undertake a delineation, or a description, without the presence of the objects to be characterised. The more versatile the fancy, the more original and striking will be the decorations produced."—*British Synonyms Discriminated*, by W. Taylor.

Is not this as if a man should undertake to supply an account of a building, and be so intent upon what he had discovered of the foundation, as to conclude his task without once looking up at the superstructure? Here, as in other instances throughout the volume, the judicious author's mind is enthralled by etymology; he takes up the original word as his guide and escort, and too often does not perceive how soon he becomes its prisoner, without liberty to tread in any path but that to which it confines him. It is not easy to find out how imagination, thus explained, differs from distinct remembrance of images, or fancy from quick and vivid recollection of them: each

is nothing more than a mode of memory. If the two words bear the above meaning, and no other, what term is left to designate that faculty of which the poet is "all compact"; he whose eye glances from earth to heaven, whose spiritual attributes body forth what his pen is prompt in turning to shape; or what is left to characterize fancy, as insinuating herself into the heart of objects with creative activity?—Imagination, in the sense of the word as giving title to a class of the following poems, has no reference to images that are merely a faithful copy, existing in the mind, of absent external objects; but is a word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects, and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws. I proceed to illustrate my meaning by instances. A parrot *hangs* from the wires of his cage by his beak or by his claws, or a monkey from the bough of a tree by his paws or his tail. Each creature does so literally and actually. In the first Eclogue of Virgil, the shepherd, thinking of the time when he is to take leave of his farm, thus addresses his goats:—

Non ego vos posthac viridi projectus in antro
Dumosa *pendere* procul de rupe videbo.*

———— Half way down
Hangs one who gathers samphire,†

is the well-known expression of Shakespeare, delineating an ordinary image upon the cliffs of Dover. In these two instances is a slight exertion of the faculty which I denominate imagination, in the use of one word: neither the goats nor the samphire-gatherer do literally hang, as does the parrot or the monkey; but, presenting to the senses something of such an appearance, the mind in its activity, for its own gratification, contemplates them as hanging.

As when far off at sea a fleet descried
Hangs in the clouds, by equinoctial winds
Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles

* "Nevermore, stretched in some mossy dell, shall I watch you hanging far above the shrub-clad cliffs." (Jackson's translation.)
† *King Lear*, IV, vi, 15.

Of Ternate or Tidore, whence merchants bring
 Their spicy drugs; they on the trading flood
 Through the wide Ethiopian to the Cape
 Ply, stemming nightly toward the Pole: so seemed
 Far off the flying Fiend.¹⁰

Here is the full strength of the imagination involved in the word *hangs*, and exerted upon the whole image: First, the fleet, an aggregate of many ships, is represented as one mighty person, whose track, we know and feel, is upon the waters; but, taking advantage of its appearance to the senses, the poet dares to represent it as *hanging in the clouds*, both for the gratification of the mind in contemplating the image itself, and in reference to the motion and appearance of the sublime objects to which it is compared.

From impressions of sight we will pass to those of sound; which, as they must necessarily be of a less definite character, shall be selected from these volumes:

Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove *broods*; ¹¹

of the same bird,

His voice was *buried* among trees,
 Yet to be come at by the breeze; ¹²

O, Cuckoo! shall I call thee *Bird*,
 Or but a wandering *Voice*? ¹³

The stock-dove is said to *coo*, a sound well imitating the note of the bird; but, by the intervention of the metaphor *broods*, the affections are called in by the imagination to assist in marking the manner in which the bird reiterates and prolongs her soft note, as if herself delighting to listen to it, and participating of a still and quiet satisfaction, like that which may be supposed inseparable from the continuous process of incubation. 'His voice was buried among trees,' a metaphor expressing the love of *seclusion* by which this bird is marked;

¹⁰ *Paradise Lost*, ii, 636-43.

¹¹ From "Resolution and Independence," stanza 1.

¹² From the poem beginning, "O Nightingale! thou surely art."

¹³ From "The Cuckoo" (1807).

and characterizing its note as not partaking of the shrill and the piercing, and therefore more easily deadened by the intervening shade; yet a note so peculiar and withal so pleasing, that the breeze, gifted with that love of the sound which the poet feels, penetrates the shades in which it is entombed, and conveys it to the ear of the listener.

Shall I call thee Bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?

This concise interrogation characterizes the seeming ubiquity of the voice of the cuckoo, and dispossesses the creature almost of a corporeal existence; the imagination being tempted to this exertion of her power by a consciousness in the memory that the cuckoo is almost perpetually heard throughout the season of spring, but seldom becomes an object of sight.

Thus far of images independent of each other, and immediately endowed by the mind with properties that do not inhere in them, upon an incitement from properties and qualities the existence of which is inherent and obvious. These processes of imagination are carried on either by conferring additional properties upon an object, or abstracting from it some of those which it actually possesses, and thus enabling it to re-act upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence.

I pass from the imagination acting upon an individual image to a consideration of the same faculty employed upon images in a conjunction by which they modify each other. The reader has already had a fine instance before him in the passage quoted from Virgil, where the apparently perilous situation of the goat, hanging upon the shaggy precipice, is contrasted with that of the shepherd contemplating it from the seclusion of the cavern in which he lies stretched at ease and in security. Take these images separately, and how unaffecting the picture compared with that produced by their being thus connected with, and opposed to, each other!

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence,
Wonder to all who do the same espy
By what means it could thither come, and whence,

So that it seems a thing endued with sense,
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, which on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun himself.

Such seemed this man; not all alive or dead
Nor all asleep, in his extreme old age.

Motionless as a cloud the old man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call,
And moveth altogether if it move at all.¹⁴

In these images, the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the imagination, immediately and mediately acting, are all brought into conjunction. The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged man, who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison. After what has been said, the image of the cloud need not be commented upon.

Thus far of an endowing or modifying power: but the imagination also shapes and *creates*; and how? By innumerable processes; and in none does it more delight than in that of consolidating numbers into unity,¹⁵ and dissolving and separating unity into number,—alterations proceeding from, and governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers. Recur to the passage already cited from Milton. When the compact fleet, as one person, has been introduced "sailing from Bengala," "They," *i.e.* the "merchants," representing the fleet resolved into a multitude of ships, "ply" their voyage towards the extremities of the earth: "So," (referring to the word "As" in the commencement) "seemed the flying Fiend"; the image of his person acting

¹⁴ From "Resolution and Independence," stanzas ix-xi.

¹⁵ Coleridge's idea (see p. 111), which led him to coin for the Imagination the term "esemplastic power"—that is, the power which forms *into one*.

to recombine the multitude of ships into one body,—the point from which the comparison set out. “So seemed,” and to whom seemed? To the heavenly Muse who dictates the poem, to the eye of the poet’s mind, and to that of the reader, present at one moment in the wide Ethiopian, and the next in the solitudes, then first broken in upon, of the infernal regions!

Modo me Thebis, modo ponit Athenis.¹⁶

Hear again this mighty poet,—speaking of the Messiah going forth to expel from heaven the rebellious angels,

Attended by ten thousand thousand Saints
He onward came: far off his coming shone,—¹⁷

the retinue of Saints, and the person of the Messiah himself, lost almost and merged in the splendor of that indefinite abstraction “His coming!”

As I do not mean here to treat this subject further than to throw some light upon the present volumes, and especially upon one division of them, I shall spare myself and the reader the trouble of considering the imagination as it deals with thoughts and sentiments, as it regulates the composition of characters, and determines the course of actions: I will not consider it (more than I have already done by implication) as that power which, in the language of one of my most esteemed friends, “draws all things to one; which makes things animate or inanimate, beings with their attributes, subjects with their accessories, take one colour and serve to one effect.”¹⁸ The grand store-houses of enthusiastic and meditative imagination, of poetical, as contra-distinguished from human and dramatic imagination, are the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures, and the works of Milton; to which I cannot forbear to add those of Spenser. I select these writers in preference to those of ancient Greece and Rome, because the anthropomorphism of the pagan re-

¹⁶ From Horace’s *Epistles*, II, i, 213 (“Now he places me at Thebes, now at Athens”).

¹⁷ *Paradise Lost*, vi, 767-68.

¹⁸ Charles Lamb upon the genius of Hogarth. [Wordsworth’s note.]

ligion subjected the minds of the greatest poets in those countries too much to the bondage of definite form, from which the Hebrews were preserved by their abhorrence of idolatry. This abhorrence was almost as strong in our great epic poet, both from circumstances of his life and from the constitution of his mind. However imbued the surface might be with classical literature, he was a Hebrew in soul; and all things tended in him towards the sublime. Spenser, of a gentler nature, maintained his freedom by aid of his allegorical spirit, at one time inciting him to create persons out of abstractions; and, at another, by a superior effort of genius, to give the universality and permanence of abstractions to his human beings, by means of attributes and emblems that belong to the highest moral truths and the purest sensations,—of which his character of *Una* is a glorious example. Of the human and dramatic imagination the works of Shakespeare are an inexhaustible source.

I tax not you, ye elements, with unkindness,
I never gave you kingdoms, call'd you daughters!¹⁹

And if, bearing in mind the many poets distinguished by this prime quality, whose names I omit to mention, yet justified by recollection of the insults which the ignorant, the incapable, and the presumptuous, have heaped upon these and my other writings, I may be permitted to anticipate the judgment of posterity upon myself, I shall declare (censurable, I grant, if the notoriety of the fact above stated does not justify me) that I have given, in these unfavorable times, evidence of exertions of this faculty upon its worthiest objects, the external universe, the moral and religious sentiments of man, his natural affections, and his acquired passions; which have the same ennobling tendency as the productions of men, in this kind, worthy to be holden in undying remembrance.

To the mode in which fancy has already been characterized as the power of evoking and combining, or, as my friend Mr. Coleridge has styled it, "the aggregative and associative power,"²⁰ my objection is only that the

¹⁹ *King Lear*, III, ii, 16-17.

²⁰ See p. 103.

definition is too general. To aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the imagination as to the fancy; but either the materials evoked and combined are different, or they are brought together under a different law, and for a different purpose. Fancy does not require that the materials which she makes use of should be susceptible of change in their constitution, from her touch; and, where they admit of modification, it is enough for her purpose if it be slight, limited and evanescent. Directly the reverse of these are the desires and demands of the imagination. She recoils from everything but the plastic, the pliant, and the indefinite. She leaves it to fancy to describe Queen Mab as coming

In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman.²¹

Having to speak of stature, she does not tell you that her gigantic angel was as tall as Pompey's Pillar; much less that he was twelve cubits, or twelve hundred cubits high; or that his dimensions equaled those of Teneriffe or Atlas;—because these, and if they were a million times as high it would be the same, are bounded. The expression is, "His stature reached the sky!"²² the illimitable firmament!—When the imagination frames a comparison, if it does not strike on the first presentation, a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and feature than upon expression and effect; less upon casual and outstanding, than upon inherent and internal, properties: moreover, the images invariably modify each other.—The law under which the processes of fancy are carried on is as capricious as the accidents of things, and the effects are surprising, playful, ludicrous, amusing, tender, or pathetic, as the objects happen to be appositely produced or fortunately combined. Fancy depends upon the rapidity and profusion with which she scatters her thoughts and images, trusting that their number, and the felicity with which they are linked together, will make amends for the want

²¹ *Romeo and Juliet*, I. iv, 55-56.

²² *Paradise Lost*, iv, 988.

of individual value; or she prides herself upon the curious subtlety and the successful elaboration with which she can detect their lurking affinities. If she can win you over to her purpose, and impart to you her feelings, she cares not how unstable or transitory may be her influence, knowing that it will not be out of her power to resume it upon an apt occasion. But the imagination is conscious of an indestructible dominion;—the soul may fall away from it, not being able to sustain its grandeur; but, if once felt and acknowledged, by no act of any other faculty of the mind can it be relaxed, impaired, or diminished. Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, imagination to incite and to support the eternal. Yet is it not the less true that fancy, as she is an active, is also, under her own laws and in her own spirit, a creative faculty. In what manner fancy ambitiously aims at a rivalry with imagination, and imagination stoops to work with the materials of fancy, might be illustrated from the compositions of all eloquent writers, whether in prose or verse; and chiefly from those of our own country. Scarcely a page of the impassioned parts of Bishop Taylor's ²³ Works can be opened that shall not afford examples. Referring the reader to those inestimable volumes, I will content myself with placing a conceit (ascribed to Lord Chesterfield) in contrast with a passage from the *Paradise Lost*:—

The dews of the evening most carefully shun,
They are the tears of the sky for the loss of the sun.

After the transgression of Adam, Milton, with other appearances of sympathizing nature, thus marks the immediate consequence,

Sky lowered, and, muttering thunder, some sad drops
Wept at completion of the mortal sin.²⁴

The associating link is the same in each instance: dew and rain, not distinguishable from the liquid substance of tears, are employed as indications of sorrow. A flash

²³ Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667).

²⁴ *Paradise Lost*, ix, 1002-03.

of surprise is the effect in the former case; a flash of surprise, and nothing more; for the nature of things does not sustain the combination. In the latter, the effects from the act, of which there is this immediate consequence and visible sign, are so momentous that the mind acknowledges the justice and reasonableness of the sympathy in nature so manifested; and the sky weeps drops of water as if with human eyes, as "Earth had before trembled from her entrails, and Nature given a second groan."

Finally, I will refer to Cotton's ²⁵ *Ode upon Winter*, an admirable composition, though stained with some peculiarities of the age in which he lived, for a general illustration of the characteristics of fancy. The middle part of this ode contains a most lively description of the entrance of Winter, with his retinue, as "a palsied king," and yet a military monarch,—advancing for conquest with his army; the several bodies of which, and their arms and equipments, are described with a rapidity of detail, and a profusion of *fanciful* comparisons, which indicate on the part of the poet extreme activity of intellect, and a correspondent hurry of delightful feeling. Winter retires from the foe into his fortress, where

——— a magazine
Of sovereign juice is cellared in;
Liquor that will the siege maintain
Should Phœbus ne'er return again.

Though myself a water-drinker, I cannot resist the pleasure of transcribing what follows, as an instance still more happy of fancy employed in the treatment of feeling than, in its preceding passages, the poem supplies of her management of forms.

'Tis that, that gives the poet rage,
And thaws the gelid blood of age;
Matures the young, restores the old,
And makes the fainting coward bold.

It lays the careful head to rest,
Calms palpitations in the breast,
Renders our lives' misfortune sweet;

²⁵ Charles Cotton (1630-1687).

Then let the chill Sirocco blow,
And gird us round with hills of snow,
Or else go whistle to the shore,
And make the hollow mountains roar,

Whilst we together jovial sit
Careless, and crowned with mirth and wit,
Where, though bleak winds confine us home
Our fancies round the world shall roam.

We'll think of all the friends we know,
And drink to all worth drinking to;
When having drunk all thine and mine,
We rather shall want healths than wine.

But where friends fail us, we'll supply
Our friendships with our charity;
Men that remote in sorrows live,
Shall by our lusty brimmers thrive.

We'll drink the wanting into wealth,
And those that languish into health,
The afflicted into joy; th' opprest
Into security and rest.

The worthy in disgrace shall find
Favour return again more kind,
And in restraint who stifled lie,
Shall taste the air of liberty.

The brave shall triumph in success
The lover shall have mistresses,
Poor unregarded virtue, praise,
And the neglected poet, bays.

Thus shall our healths do others good,
Whilst we ourselves do all we would;
For, freed from envy and from care,
What would we be but what we are?

When I sat down to write this preface, it was my intention to have made it more comprehensive; but, thinking that I ought rather to apologize for detaining the reader so long, I will here conclude.

ADVICE TO A YOUNG REVIEWER

EDWARD COPLESTON

[Copleston was elected Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, when only nineteen years of age, in 1795, and Professor of Poetry in the University when twenty-six. This brilliant ironic skit was published anonymously at Oxford in 1807; the full title was *Advice to a Young Reviewer, with a Specimen of the Art* (see note at the close). The late John Churton Collins writes of it as follows: "It was immediately inspired, not, as is commonly supposed, by the critiques in the *Edinburgh Review*, but by the critiques in the *British Critic*, a periodical founded in 1793, and exceedingly influential between that time and about 1812. Archbishop Whately, correcting a statement in the Life of Copleston by W. J. Copleston, says that it was occasioned by a review of Mant's poems in the *British Critic*. (Whately's *Reminiscences of Bishop Copleston*, p. 6.) But on referring to the review of these poems, which appeared in the November number of 1806,—plainly the review referred to,—we find nothing in it to support Whately's assertion. That the reviews in the *British Critic* are, however, what Copleston is parodying in the critique of 'L'Allegro' is abundantly clear; but what he says about voyages and travels and about science and recondite learning appear to have reference to articles particularly characteristic of the *Edinburgh Review*. It was not, however, till after the date of Copleston's parody that the *Edinburgh Review* began conspicuously to illustrate what Copleston here satirises; it was not till a time more recent still that periodical literature generally exemplified in literal seriousness what Copleston intended as extravagant irony. . . . This brochure is evidently modelled on Swift's 'Digression Concerning Critics' in the third section of the *Tale of a Tub*, and owes something also to the 'Treatise on the Bathos' in Pope's and Swift's *Miscellanies*, as the title may have been suggested by Shaftesbury's *Advice to an Author*." (Introduction to *Critical Essays and Literary Fragments*, New English Garner Series.)]

You are now about to enter on a profession which has the means of doing much good to society, and scarcely any temptation to do harm. You may encourage genius, you may chastise superficial arrogance, expose falsehood, correct error, and guide the taste and opinions of the age in no small degree by the books you praise and

recommend. And this too may be done without running the risk of making any enemies, or subjecting yourself to be called to account for your criticism, however severe. While your name is unknown, your person is invulnerable at the same time your aim is sure, for you may take it at your leisure; and your blows fall heavier than those of any writer whose name is given, or who is simply anonymous. There is a mysterious authority in the plural *We*, which no single name, whatever may be its reputation, can acquire; and, under the sanction of this imposing style, your strictures, your praise, and your dogmas will command universal attention, and be received as the fruit of united talents acting on one common principle,—as the judgments of a tribunal who decide only on mature deliberation, and who protect the interests of literature with unceasing vigilance.

Such being the high importance of that office, and such its opportunities, I cannot bestow a few hours of leisure better than in furnishing you with some hints for the more easy and effectual discharge of it; hints which are, I confess, loosely thrown together, but which are the result of long experience, and of frequent reflection and comparison. And if anything should strike you, at first sight, as rather equivocal in point of morality, or deficient in liberality and feeling, I beg you will suppress all such scruples, and consider them as the offspring of a contracted education and narrow way of thinking, which a little intercourse with the world and sober reasoning will speedily overcome.

Now, as in the conduct of life nothing is more to be desired than some governing principle of action, to which all other principles and motives must be made subservient, so in the art of reviewing I would lay down as a fundamental position, which you must never lose sight of, and which must be the mainspring of all your criticisms—*Write what will sell!* To this Golden Rule every minor canon must be subordinate, and must be either immediately deducible from it or at least be made consistent with it.

Be not staggered at the sound of a precept which, upon examination, will be found as honest and virtuous as it is discreet. I have already sketched out the great

services which it is in your power to render mankind; but all your efforts will be unavailing if men did not read what you write. Your utility, therefore, it is plain, depends upon your popularity; and popularity cannot be attained without humoring the taste and inclinations of men. Be assured that, by a similar train of sound and judicious reasoning, the consciences of thousands in public life are daily quieted. It is better for the state that their party should govern than any other. The good which they can effect by the exercise of power is infinitely greater than any which could arise from a rigid adherence to certain subordinate moral precepts, which therefore should be violated without scruple whenever they stand in the way of their leading purpose. He who sticks at these can never act a great part in the world, and is not fit to act it if he could. Such maxims may be very useful in ordinary affairs, and for the guidance of ordinary men; but when we mount into the sphere of public utility, we must adopt more enlarged principles, and not suffer ourselves to be cramped and fettered by petty notions of right and moral duty.

When you have reconciled yourself to this liberal way of thinking, you will find many inferior advantages resulting from it, which at first did not enter into your consideration. In particular, it will greatly lighten your labors to *follow* the public taste, instead of taking upon you to *direct* it. The task of pleasing is at all times easier than that of instructing; at least it does not stand in need of painful research and preparation, and may be effected in general by a little vivacity of manner, and a dexterous morigeration, as Lord Bacon calls it, to the humors and frailties of men. Your responsibility, too, is thereby much lessened. Justice and candor can only be required of you so far as they coincide with this main principle; and a little experience will convince you that these are not the happiest means of accomplishing your purpose.

It has been idly said that a reviewer acts in a judicial capacity, and that his conduct should be regulated by the same rules by which the judge of a civil court is governed: that he should rid himself of every bias; be patient, cautious, sedate, and rigidly impartial; that he should not

seek to show off himself; and should check every disposition to enter into the case as a partisan. Such is the language of superficial thinkers; but in reality there is no analogy between the two cases. A judge is promoted to that office by the authority of the state, a reviewer by his own. The former is independent of control, and may therefore freely follow the dictates of his own conscience; the latter depends for his very bread upon the breath of public opinion; the great law of self-preservation therefore points out to him a different line of action. Besides, as we have already observed, if he ceases to please, he is no longer read, and consequently is no longer useful. In a court of justice, too, the part of amusing the bystanders rests with the counsel; in the case of criticism, if the reviewer himself does not undertake it, who will?

Instead of vainly aspiring to the gravity of a magistrate, I would advise him, when he sits down to write, to place himself in the imaginary situation of a cross-examining pleader. He may comment, in a vein of agreeable irony, upon the profession, the manner of life, the look, dress, or even the name, of the witness he is examining; when he has raised a contemptuous opinion of him in the minds of the Court, he may proceed to draw answers from him capable of a ludicrous turn, and he may carve and garble these to his own liking.

This mode of proceeding you will find most practicable in poetry, where the boldness of the image or the delicacy of thought (for which the reader's mind was prepared in the original) will easily be made to appear extravagant or affected, if judiciously singled out and detached from the group to which it belongs. Again, since much depends upon the rhythm and the terseness of expression (both of which are sometimes destroyed by dropping a single word, or transposing a phrase), I have known much advantage arise from *not* quoting in the form of a literal extract, but giving a brief summary in prose, of the contents of a poetical passage, and interlarding your own language, with occasional phrases of the poem marked with inverted commas.¹ These, and a thousand other little expedients, by which the arts of quizzing and banter

¹ Compare Jeffrey's method in his review of *The Excursion*, p. 73.

flourish, practice will soon teach you. If it should be necessary to transcribe a dull passage, not very fertile in topics of humor and raillery, you may introduce it as a "favorable specimen of the author's manner."

Few people are aware of the powerful effects of what is philosophically termed Association. Without any positive violation of truth, the whole dignity of a passage may be undermined by contriving to raise some vulgar and ridiculous notions in the mind of the reader; and language teems with examples of words by which the same idea is expressed, with the difference only that one excites a feeling of respect, the other of contempt. Thus you may call a fit of melancholy "the sulks," resentment "a pet," a steed "a nag," a feast "a junketing," sorrow and affliction "whining and blubbering." By transferring the terms peculiar to one state of society to analogous situations and characters in another, the same object is attained. "A Drill Sergeant" or "a Cat and Nine Tails" in the Trojan War, "a Lesbos smack putting into the Piræus," "the Penny Post of Jerusalem," and other combinations of the like nature which, when you have a little indulged in that vein of thought, will readily suggest themselves, never fail to raise a smile, if not immediately at the expense of the author, yet entirely destructive of that frame of mind which his poem requires in order to be relished.

I have dwelt chiefly on this branch of literature, because you are chiefly to look here for materials of fun and irony. Voyages and travels, indeed, are no barren ground, and you must seldom let a number of your review go abroad without an article of this description. The charm of this species of writing, so universally felt, arises chiefly from its uniting narrative with information. The interest we take in the story can only be kept alive by minute incident and occasional detail, which puts us in possession of the traveler's feelings, his hopes, his fears, his disappointments, and his pleasures. At the same time the thirst for knowledge and love of novelty is gratified by continual information respecting the people and countries he visits. If you wish, therefore, to run down the book, you have only to play off these two parts against each other. When the writer's object is to satisfy the

first inclination, you are to thank him for communicating to the world such valuable facts as, whether he lost his way in the night, or sprained his ankle, or had no appetite for his dinner. If he is busied about describing the mineralogy, natural history, agriculture, trade, etc., of a country, you may mention a hundred books from whence the same information may be obtained, and deprecate the practice of emptying old musty folios into new quartos, to gratify that sickly taste for a smattering about everything which distinguishes the present age.

In works of science and recondite learning, the task you have undertaken will not be so difficult as you may imagine. Tables of Contents and Indexes are blessed helps in the hands of a reviewer; but, more than all, the Preface is the field from which his richest harvest is to be gathered. In the Preface, the author usually gives a summary of what has been written on the same subject before; he acknowledges the assistance he has received from different sources, and the reasons of his dissent from former writers; he confesses that certain parts have been less attentively considered than others, and that information has come to his hands too late to be made use of; he points out many things in the composition of his work which he thinks may provoke animadversion, and endeavors to defend or palliate his own practice. Here, then, is a fund of wealth for the reviewer, lying upon the very surface. If he knows anything of his business, he will turn all these materials against the author, carefully suppressing the source of his information, and as if drawing from the stores of his own mind long ago laid up for this very purpose. If the author's references are correct, a great point is gained; for by consulting a few passages of the original works, it will be easy to discuss the subject with the air of having a previous knowledge of the whole.

Your chief vantage ground is, that you may fasten upon any position in the book you are reviewing, and treat it as principal and essential, when perhaps it is of little weight in the main argument; but, by allotting a large share of your criticism to it, the reader will naturally be led to give it a proportionate importance, and to consider the merit of the treatise at issue upon that

single question. If anybody complains that the greater and more valuable parts remain unnoticed, your answer is that it is impossible to pay attention to all, and that your duty is rather to prevent the propagation of error than to lavish praises upon that which, if really excellent, will work its way in the world without your help.

Indeed, if the plan of your review admits of selection, you had better not meddle with works of deep research and original speculation,—such as have already attracted much notice, and cannot be treated superficially without fear of being found out. The time required for making yourself thoroughly master of the subject is so great, that you may depend upon it they will never pay for the reviewing. They are generally the fruit of long study, and of talents concentrated in the steady pursuit of one object; it is not likely, therefore, that you can throw much light on a question of this nature, or even plausibly combat the author's propositions, in the course of a few hours, which is all you can well afford to devote to them. And without accomplishing one or the other of these points, your review will gain no celebrity, and of course no good will be done.

Enough has been said to give you some insight into the facilities with which your new employment abounds. I will only mention one more, because of its extensive and almost universal application to all branches of literature: the topic, I mean, which by the old rhetoricians was called *ἐξ ἐναντίων*;² that is, when a work excels in one quality, you may blame it for not having the opposite. For instance, if the biographical sketch of a literary character is minute and full of anecdote, you may enlarge on the advantages of philosophical reflection, and the superior mind required to give a judicious analysis of the opinions and works of deceased authors. On the contrary, if the latter method is pursued by the biographer, you can, with equal ease, extol the lively coloring, and truth, and interest, of exact delineation and detail. This topic, you will perceive, enters into style as well as matter, where many virtues might be named which are incompatible; and whichever the author has preferred, it will be the

² Literally, from opposites.

signal for you to launch forth on the praises of its opposite, and continually to hold up that to your reader as the model of excellence in this species of writing.

You will perhaps wonder why all my instructions are pointed towards the censure, and not the praise, of books; but many reasons might be given why it should be so. The chief are, that this part is both easier, and will sell better. Let us hear the words of Mr. Burke on a subject not very dissimilar: "In such cases," says he, "the writer has a certain fire and alacrity inspired into him by a consciousness that (let it fare how it will with the subject) his ingenuity will be sure of applause; and this alacrity becomes much greater, if he acts upon the offensive, by the impetuosity that always accompanies an attack, and the unfortunate propensity which mankind have to finding and exaggerating faults." (Preface, *Vindic. Nat. Soc.*, p. 6.)

You will perceive that I have on no occasion sanctioned the baser motives of private pique, envy, revenge, and love of detraction. At least I have not recommended harsh treatment upon any of these grounds. I have argued simply on the abstract moral principle which a reviewer should ever have present to his mind; but if any of these motives insinuate themselves as secondary springs of action, I would not condemn them. They may come in aid of the grand leading principle, and powerfully second its operation.

But it is time to close these tedious precepts, and to furnish you with—what speaks plainer than any precept—a specimen of the art itself, in which several of them are embodied. It is hastily done; but it exemplifies well enough what I have said of the poetical department, and exhibits most of those qualities which disappointed authors are fond of railing at, under the names of flippancy, arrogance, conceit, misrepresentation, and malevolence,—reproaches which you will only regard as so many acknowledgments of success in your undertaking, and infallible tests of an established fame, and rapidly increasing circulation.³

³ There follows a mock review of Milton's *L'Allegro*, concluding with the words: "Upon the whole, Mr. Milton seems to be possessed of some fancy and talent for rhyming; two most dan-

SCOTT'S "LADY OF THE LAKE"

FRANCIS JEFFREY

[From the *Edinburgh Review* for August, 1810.]

Mr. Scott, though living in an age unusually prolific of original poetry, has manifestly outstripped all his competitors in the race of popularity, and stands already upon a height to which no other writer has attained in the memory of any one now alive. We doubt, indeed, whether any English poet ever had so many of his books sold, or so many of his verses read and admired by such a multitude of persons, in so short a time. We are credibly informed that nearly thirty thousand copies of *The Lady* have been already disposed of in this country, and that the demand for *Marmion* and the poem now before us has been still more considerable,—a circulation, we believe, altogether without example, in the case of a bulky work, not addressed to the bigotry of the mere mob, either religious or political.

A popularity so universal is a pretty sure proof of extraordinary merit,—a far surer one, we readily admit, than would be afforded by any praises of ours; and therefore, though we pretend to be privileged, in ordinary cases, to foretell the ultimate reception of all claims on public admiration, our function may be thought to cease, where the event is already so certain and conspicuous. As it is a sore thing, however, to be deprived of our privileges on so important an occasion, we hope to be pardoned for insinuating that, even in such a case, the office of the critic may not be altogether superfluous. Though the success of the author be decisive, and likely to be permanent, it still may not be without its use to point out, in consequence of what, and in spite of what, he has succeeded, nor altogether unimportant to trace the precise limits of the connection which, even in this dull

gerous endowments which often unfit men for acting a useful part in life without qualifying them for that which is great and brilliant. If it be true, as we have heard, that he has declined advantageous prospects in business for the sake of indulging his poetical humor, we hope it is not yet too late to prevail upon him to retract his resolution."

world, indisputably subsists between success and desert, and to ascertain how far unexampled popularity does really imply unrivalled talent.

As it is the object of poetry to give pleasure, it would seem to be a pretty safe conclusion that that poetry must be the best which gives the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of persons. Yet we must pause a little, before we give our assent to so plausible a proposition. It would not be quite correct, we fear, to say that those are invariably the best judges who are most easily pleased. The great multitude, even of the reading world, must necessarily be uninstructed and injudicious, and will frequently be found not only to derive pleasure from what is worthless in finer eyes, but to be quite insensible to those beauties which afford the most exquisite delight to more cultivated understandings. True pathos and sublimity will indeed charm every one; but, out of this lofty sphere, we are pretty well convinced that the poetry which appears most perfect to a very refined taste will not often turn out to be very popular poetry.

This, indeed, is saying nothing more than that the ordinary readers of poetry have not a very refined taste, and that they are often insensible to many of its highest beauties, while they still more frequently mistake its imperfections for excellence. The fact, when stated in this simple way, commonly excites neither opposition nor surprise; and yet if it be asked why the taste of a few individuals, who do not perceive beauty where many others perceive it, should be exclusively dignified with the name of a good taste, or why poetry which gives pleasure to a very great number of readers should be thought inferior to that which pleases a much smaller number, the answer, perhaps, may not be quite so ready as might have been expected from the alacrity of our assent to the first proposition. That there is a good answer to be given, however, we entertain no doubt; and if that which we are about to offer should not appear very clear or satisfactory, we must submit to have it thought that the fault is not altogether in the subject.

In the first place, then, it should be remembered that, though the taste of very few good judges is necessarily the taste of a few, it is implied in their description that

they are persons eminently qualified, by natural sensibility and long experience and reflection, to perceive all beauties that really exist, as well as to settle the relative value and importance of all the different sorts of beauty;—they are in that very state, in short, to which all who are in any degree capable of tasting those refined pleasures would certainly arrive, if their sensibility were increased and their experience and reflection enlarged. It is difficult, therefore, in following out the ordinary analogies of language, to avoid considering them as in the right, and calling their taste the true and the just one, when it appears that it is such as is uniformly produced by the cultivation of those faculties upon which all our perceptions of taste so obviously depend.

It is to be considered also that, although it be the end of poetry to please, one of the parties whose pleasure and whose notions of excellence will always be primarily consulted in its composition, is the poet himself; and as he must necessarily be more cultivated than the great body of his readers, the presumption is that he will always belong, comparatively speaking, to the class of good judges, and endeavor, consequently, to produce that sort of excellence which is likely to meet with their approbation. When authors, and those of whose suffrages authors are most ambitious, thus conspire to fix upon the same standard of what is good in taste and composition, it is easy to see how it should come to bear this name in society, in preference to what might afford more pleasure to individuals of less influence. Besides all this, it is obvious that it must be infinitely more *difficult* to produce anything conformable to this exalted standard, than merely to fall in with the current of popular taste. To attain the former object, it is necessary, for the most part, to understand thoroughly all the feelings and associations that are modified or created by cultivation; to accomplish the latter, it will often be sufficient merely to have observed the course of familiar preferences. Success, however, is rare in proportion as it is difficult; and it is needless to say what a vast addition rarity makes to value, or how exactly our admiration at success is proportioned to our sense of the difficulty of the undertaking.

Such seem to be the most general and immediate causes of the apparent paradox of reckoning that which pleases the greatest number as inferior to that which pleases the few; and such the leading grounds for fixing the standard of excellence, in a question of mere feeling and gratification, by a different rule than that of the quantity of gratification produced. With regard to some of the fine arts—for the distinction between popular and actual merit obtains in them all—there are no other reasons, perhaps, to be assigned; and, in music for example, when we have said that it is the *authority* of those who are best qualified by nature and study, and the *difficulty* and *rarity* of the attainment, that entitles certain exquisite performances to rank higher than others that give far more general delight, we have probably said all that can be said in explanation of this mode of speaking and judging. In poetry, however, and in some other departments, this familiar though somewhat extraordinary rule of estimation is justified by other considerations.

As it is the cultivation of natural and perhaps universal capacities that produces that refined taste which takes away our pleasure in vulgar excellence, so it is to be considered that there is an universal tendency to the propagation of such a taste, and that, in times tolerably favorable to human happiness, there is a continual progress and improvement in this, as in the other faculties of nations and large assemblages of men. The number of intelligent judges may therefore be regarded as perpetually on the increase. The inner circle, to which the poet delights chiefly to pitch his voice, is perpetually enlarging; and, looking to that great futurity to which his ambition is constantly directed, it may be found that the most refined style of composition to which he can attain will be, at the last, the most extensively and permanently popular. This holds true, we think, with regard to all the productions of art that are open to the inspection of any considerable part of the community; but, with regard to poetry in particular, there is one circumstance to be attended to, that renders this conclusion peculiarly safe, and goes far to reconcile the taste of the multitude with that of more cultivated judges.

As it seems difficult to conceive that mere cultivation

should either absolutely create or utterly destroy any natural capacity of enjoyment, it is not easy to suppose that the qualities which delight the uninstructed should be *substantially* different from those which give pleasure to the enlightened. They may be arranged according to a different scale, and certain shades and accompaniments may be more or less indispensable; but the qualities in a poem that give most pleasure to the refined and fastidious critic are in substance, we believe, the very same that delight the most injudicious of its admirers: and the very wide difference which exists between their usual estimates may be in a great degree accounted for by considering that the one judges absolutely, the other relatively—that the one attends only to the intrinsic qualities of the work, while the other refers more immediately to the merit of the author. The most popular passages in popular poetry are in fact, for the most part, very beautiful and striking; yet they are very often such passages as could never be ventured on by any writer who aimed at the praise of the judicious; and this for the obvious reason that they are trite and hackneyed,—that they have been repeated till they have lost all grace and propriety, and, instead of exalting the imagination by the impression of original genius or creative fancy, only nauseate and offend by the association of paltry plagiarism and impudent inanity. It is only, however, on those who have read and remembered the original passages, and their better imitations, that this effect is produced. To the ignorant and the careless, the twentieth imitation has all the charm of an original; and that which oppresses the more experienced reader with weariness and disgust, rouses them with all the force and vivacity of novelty. It is not, then, because the ornaments of popular poetry are deficient in intrinsic worth and beauty, that they are slighted by the critical reader, but because he at once recognizes them to be stolen, and perceives that they are arranged without taste or congruity. In his indignation at the dishonesty and his contempt for the poverty of the collector, he overlooks altogether the value of what he has collected, or remembers it only as an aggravation of his offense,—as converting larceny into sacrilege, and adding the guilt of profanation to the folly of unsuitable

finery. There are other features, no doubt, that distinguish the idols of vulgar admiration from the beautiful exemplars of pure taste; but this is so much the most characteristic and remarkable that we know no way in which we could so shortly describe the poetry that pleases the multitude, and displeases the select few, as by saying that it consisted of all the most known and most brilliant parts of the most celebrated authors,—of a splendid and unmeaning accumulation of those images and phrases which had long charmed every reader in the works of their original inventors.

The justice of these remarks will probably be at once admitted by all who have attended to the history and effects of what may be called *poetical diction*¹ in general, or even of such particular phrases and epithets as have been indebted to their beauty for too great a notoriety. Our associations with all this class of expressions, which have become trite only in consequence of their intrinsic excellence, now suggest to us no ideas but those of school-boy imbecility and childish affectation. We look upon them merely as the common, hired, and tawdry trappings of all who wish to put on, for the hour, the masquerade habit of poetry; and, instead of receiving from them any kind of delight or emotion, do not even distinguish or attend to the signification of the words of which they consist. The ear is so palled with their repetition, and so accustomed to meet with them as the habitual expletives of the lowest class of versifiers, that they come at last to pass over it without exciting any sort of conception whatever, and are not even so much attended to as to expose their most gross incoherence or inconsistency to detection. It is of this quality that Swift has availed himself in so remarkable a manner, in his famous "Song by a Person of Quality,"² which consists entirely in a selection of some of the most trite and well-sounding phrases and epithets in the poetical lexicon of the time, strung together without any kind of meaning or con-

¹ See Wordsworth on the same phrase, p. 7 and note.

² The verses begin:

I said to my heart, between sleeping and waking,
Thou wild thing that always art leaping or aching.
Jeffrey's description would apply rather more accurately to another skit of Swift's, called "A Love Song in the Modern Taste."

sistency, and yet so disposed as to have been perused, perhaps by one half of their readers, without any suspicion of the deception. Most of those phrases, however, which had thus become sickening, and almost insignificant, to the intelligent readers of poetry in the days of Queen Anne, are in themselves beautiful and expressive, and no doubt retain much of their native grace in those ears that have not been alienated by their repetition.

But it is not merely from the use of much excellent diction that a modern poet is thus debarred by the lavishness of his predecessors. There is a certain range of subjects and characters, and a certain manner and tone, which were probably, in their origin, as graceful and attractive, which have been proscribed by the same dread of imitation. It would be too long to enter, in this place, into any detailed examination of the peculiarities—originating chiefly in this source—which distinguish ancient from modern poetry. It may be enough just to remark that, as the elements of poetical emotion are necessarily limited, so it was natural for those who first sought to excite it to avail themselves of those subjects, situations, and images that were most obviously calculated to produce that effect, and to assist them by the use of all those aggravating circumstances that most readily occurred as likely to heighten their operation. In this way they may be said to have got possession of all the choice materials of their art, and, working without fear of comparisons, fell naturally into a free and graceful style of execution, at the same time that the profusion of their resources made them somewhat careless and inexperienced in their application. After-poets were in a very different situation. They could neither take the most natural and general topics of interest, nor treat them with the ease and indifference of those who had the whole store at their command,—because this was precisely what had been already done by those who had gone before them; and they were therefore put upon various expedients for attaining their object and yet preserving their claim to originality. Some of them accordingly set themselves to observe and delineate both characters and external objects with greater minuteness and fidelity, and others to

analyze more carefully the mingling passions of the heart, and to feed and cherish a more limited train of emotion, through a longer and more artful succession of incidents; while a third sort distorted both nature and passion, according to some fantastical theory of their own, or took such a narrow corner of each, and dissected it with such curious and microscopic accuracy, that its original form was no longer discernible by the eyes of the uninstructed.⁸ In this way we think that modern poetry has both been enriched with more exquisite pictures, and deeper and more sustained strains of pathetic, than were known to the less elaborate artists of antiquity; at the same time that it has been defaced with more affectation, and loaded with far more intricacy. But whether they failed or succeeded, and whether they distinguished themselves from their predecessors by faults or by excellences, the later poets, we conceive, must be admitted to have almost always written in a more constrained and narrow manner than their originals, and to have departed farther from what was obvious, easy, and natural. Modern poetry, in this respect, may be compared, perhaps, without any great impropriety, to modern sculpture. It is greatly inferior to the ancient in freedom, grace, and simplicity; but, in return, it frequently possesses a more decided expression, and more fine finishing of less suitable embellishments.

Whatever may be gained or lost, however, by this change of manner, it is obvious that poetry must become less popular by means of it. For the most natural and obvious manner is always the most taking; and whatever costs the author much pains and labor is usually found to require a corresponding effort on the part of the reader,—which all readers are not disposed to make. That they who seek to be original by means of affectation should revolt more by their affectation than they attract by their originality, is just and natural; but even the nobler devices that win the suffrages of the judicious by their intrinsic beauty, as well as their novelty, are apt to repel the multitude, and to obstruct the popularity of some of the most exquisite productions of genius. The beau-

⁸ Jeffrey probably alludes to John Donne and other poets of the "metaphysical" school.

tiful but minute delineations of such admirable observers as Crabbe or Cowper are apt to appear tedious to those who take little interest in their subjects, and have no concern about their art; and the refined, deep, and sustained pathetic of Campbell is still more apt to be mistaken for monotony and languor, by those who are either devoid of sensibility or impatient of quiet reflection. The most popular style undoubtedly is that which has great variety and brilliancy, rather than exquisite finish in its images and descriptions, and which touches lightly on many passions, without raising any so high as to transcend the comprehension of ordinary mortals—or dwelling on it so long as to exhaust their patience.

Whether Mr. Scott holds the same opinion with us upon these matters, and has intentionally conformed his practice to this theory, or whether the peculiarities in his compositions have been produced merely by following out the natural bent of his genius, we do not presume to determine. But that he has actually made use of all our recipes for popularity, we think very evident; and conceive that few things are more curious than the singular skill, or good fortune, with which he has reconciled his claims on the favor of the multitude with his pretensions to more select admiration. Confident in the force and originality of his own genius, he has not been afraid to avail himself of commonplaces both of diction and of sentiment, whenever they appeared to be beautiful or impressive,—using them, however, at all times, with the skill and spirit of an inventor; and, quite certain that he could not be mistaken for a plagiarist or imitator, he has made free use of that great treasury of characters, images, and expressions, which had been accumulated by the most celebrated of his predecessors; at the same time that the rapidity of his transitions, the novelty of his combinations, and the spirit and variety of his own thoughts and inventions, show plainly that he was a borrower from anything but poverty, and took only what he would have given if he had been born in an earlier generation. The great secret of his popularity, however, and the leading characteristic of his poetry, appear to us to consist evidently in this,—that he has made more use of common topics, images and expressions than any original

poet of later times, and at the same time displayed more genius and originality than any recent author who has worked in the same materials. By the latter peculiarity he has entitled himself to the admiration of every description of readers; by the former he is recommended in an especial manner to the inexperienced, at the hazard of some little offence to the more cultivated and fastidious.

In the choice of his subjects, for example, he does not attempt to interest merely by fine observation or pathetic sentiment, but takes the assistance of a story, and enlists the reader's curiosity among his motives for attention. Then his characters are all selected from the most common *dramatis personæ* of poetry: kings, warriors, knights, outlaws, nuns, minstrels, secluded damsels, wizards, and true lovers. He never ventures to carry us into the cottage of the modern peasant, like Crabbe or Cowper; nor into the bosom of domestic privacy, like Campbell; nor among creatures of the imagination, like Southey or Darwin.⁴ Such personages, we readily admit, are not in themselves so interesting or striking as those to whom Mr. Scott has devoted himself; but they are far less familiar in poetry, and are therefore more likely, perhaps, to engage the attention of those to whom poetry is familiar. In the management of the passions, again, Mr. Scott appears to us to have pursued the same popular and comparatively easy course. He has raised all the most familiar and poetical emotions, by the most obvious aggravations, and in the most compendious and judicious way. He has dazzled the reader with the splendor, and even warmed him with the transient heat, of various affections; but he has nowhere fairly kindled him with enthusiasm or melted him into tenderness. Writing for the world at large, he has wisely abstained from attempting to raise any passion to a height to which worldly people could not be transported, and contented himself with giving his reader the chance of feeling as a brave, kind, and affectionate gentleman must often feel in the ordinary course of his existence, without trying to breathe into him either that lofty enthusiasm which disdains the ordinary business and amusements of life, or that quiet

⁴ Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), author of *The Loves of the Plants*, etc.

and deep sensibility which unfits for most of its pursuits.

With regard to diction and imagery, too, it is quite obvious that Mr. Scott has not aimed at writing either in a very pure or a very consistent style. He seems to have been anxious only to strike, and to be easily and universally understood; and for this purpose to have culled the most glittering and conspicuous expressions of the most popular authors, and to have interwoven them in splendid confusion with his own nervous diction and irregular versification. Indifferent whether he coins or borrows, and drawing with equal freedom on his memory and his imagination, he goes boldly forward, in full reliance on a never-failing abundance, and dazzles with his richness and variety even those who are most apt to be offended with his glare and irregularity. There is nothing in Mr. Scott of the severe and majestic style of Milton, or of the terse and fine composition of Pope, or of the elaborate elegance and melody of Campbell, or even of the flowing and redundant diction of Southey. But there is a medley of bright images and glowing words, set carelessly and loosely together,—a diction tinged successfully with the careless richness of Shakespeare, the harshness and antique simplicity of the old romances, the homeliness of vulgar ballads and anecdotes, and the sentimental glitter of the most modern poetry,—passing from the borders of the ludicrous to those of the sublime, alternately minute and energetic, sometimes artificial, and frequently negligent, but always full of spirit and vivacity, abounding in images that are striking, at first sight, to minds of every contexture, and never expressing a sentiment which it can cost the most ordinary reader any exertion to comprehend.

Such seem to be the leading qualities that have contributed to Mr. Scott's popularity; and, as some of them are obviously of a kind to diminish his merit in the eyes of more fastidious judges, it is but fair to complete this view of his peculiarities by a hasty notice of such of them as entitle him to unqualified admiration. And here it is impossible not to be struck with that vivifying spirit of strength and animation which pervades all the inequalities of his composition, and keeps constantly on the mind of the reader the impression of great power,

spirit, and intrepidity. There is nothing cold, creeping, or feeble, in all Mr. Scott's poetry,—no laborious littleness, or puling classical affectation. He has his failures, indeed, like other people; but he always attempts vigorously, and never fails in his immediate object, without accomplishing something far beyond the reach of an ordinary writer. Even when he wanders from the paths of pure taste, he leaves behind him the footsteps of a powerful genius, and moulds the most humble of his materials into a form worthy of a nobler substance. Allied to this inherent vigor and animation, and in a great degree derived from it, is that air of facility and freedom which adds so peculiar a grace to most of Mr. Scott's compositions. There is certainly no living poet whose works seem to come from him with so much ease, or who so seldom appears to labor, even in the most burdensome parts of his performance. He seems, indeed, never to think either of himself or his reader, but to be completely identified and lost in the personages with whom he is occupied; and the attention of the reader is consequently either transferred, unbroken, to their adventures, or, if it glance back for a moment to the author, it is only to think how much more might be done by putting forth that strength at full, which has without effort accomplished so many wonders. It is owing partly to these qualities, and partly to the great variety of his style, that Mr. Scott is much less frequently tedious than any other bulky poet with whom we are acquainted. His store of images is so copious that he never dwells upon one long enough to produce weariness in the reader; and, even where he deals in borrowed or tawdry wares, the rapidity of his transitions, and the transient glance with which he is satisfied as to each, leave the critic no time to be offended, and hurry him forward, along with the multitude, enchanted with the brilliancy of the exhibition. Thus the very frequency of his deviations from pure taste comes, in some sort, to constitute their apology, and the profusion and variety of his faults to afford a new proof of his genius.

These, we think, are the general characteristics of Mr. Scott's poetry! Among his minor peculiarities we might notice his singular talent for description, and especially

for the description of scenes abounding in *motion* or *action* of any kind. In this department, indeed, we conceive him to be almost without a rival, either among modern or ancient poets; and the character and process of his descriptions are as extraordinary as their effect is astonishing. He places before the eyes of his readers a more distinct and complete picture, perhaps, than any other artist ever presented by mere words; and yet he does not (like Crabbe) enumerate all the visible parts of the subject with any degree of minuteness, nor confine himself by any means to what is visible. The singular merit of his delineations, on the contrary, consists in this,—that with a few bold and abrupt strokes he finishes a most spirited outline, and then instantly kindles it by the sudden light and color of some moral affection. There are none of his fine descriptions, accordingly which do not derive a great part of their clearness and picturesque effect, as well as their interest, from the quantity of character and moral expression which is thus blended with their details, and which, so far from interrupting the conception of the external object, very powerfully stimulate the fancy of the reader to complete it, and give a grace and a spirit to the whole representation, of which we do not know where to look for any other example.

Another very striking peculiarity in Mr. Scott's poetry is the air of freedom and nature which he has contrived to impart to most of his distinguished characters, and with which no poet more modern than Shakespeare has ventured to represent personages of such dignity. We do not allude here merely to the genuine familiarity and homeliness of many of his scenes and dialogues, but to that air of gaiety and playfulness in which persons of high rank seem, from time immemorial, to have thought it necessary to array, not their courtesy only, but their generosity and their hostility. This tone of good society Mr. Scott has shed over his higher characters with great grace and effect, and has in this way not only made his representations much more faithful and true to nature, but has very agreeably relieved the monotony of that tragic solemnity which ordinary writers appear to think indispensable to the dignity of poetical heroes and heroines. We are not sure, however, whether he has not occa-

sionally exceeded a little in the use of this ornament, and given, now and then, too coquettish and trifling a tone to discussions of weight and moment.

Mr. Scott has many other characteristic excellences; but we have already detained our readers too long with this imperfect sketch of his poetical character, and must proceed without further delay to give them some account of the work which is now before us.

WORDSWORTH'S "EXCURSION"

FRANCIS JEFFREY

[This review appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for November, 1814. When he reprinted it in his collected essays, Jeffrey added a note in which he said: "I have spoken in many places rather too bitterly and confidently of the faults of Mr. Wordsworth's poetry; and forgetting that, even on my own view of them, they were but faults of taste, or venial self-partiality, have sometimes visited them, I fear, with an asperity which should be reserved for objects of moral reprobation. If I were now to deal with the whole question of his poetical merits, though my judgment might not be substantially different, I hope I should repress the greater part of these *vivacités* of expression." Coleridge commented severely on the review in that section of the *Biographia Literaria* entitled "Remarks on the Present Mode of Conducting Critical Journals."]

This will never do. It bears no doubt the stamp of the author's heart and fancy, and unfortunately not half so visibly as that of his peculiar system. His former poems were intended to recommend that system, and to bespeak favor for it by their individual merit; but this, we suspect, must be recommended by the system, and can only expect to succeed where it has been previously established. It is longer, weaker, and tamer, than any of Mr. Wordsworth's other productions; with less boldness of originality, and less even of that extreme simplicity and lowliness of tone which wavered so prettily, in the *Lyrical Ballads*, between silliness and pathos. We have imitations of Cowper and even of Milton here, engrafted on the natural drawl of the Lakers, and all diluted into

harmony by that profuse and irrepressible wordiness which deluges all the blank verse of this school of poetry, and lubricates and weakens the whole structure of their style.

Though it fairly fills four hundred and twenty good quarto pages, without note, vignette, or any sort of extraneous assistance, it is stated in the title—with something of an imprudent candor—to be but “a portion” of a larger work; and in the preface, where an attempt is rather unsuccessfully made to explain the whole design, it is still more rashly disclosed that it is but “a part of the second part of a *long* and laborious work”—which is to consist of three parts. What Mr. Wordsworth’s ideas of length are, we have no means of accurately judging; but we cannot help suspecting that they are liberal, to a degree that will alarm the weakness of most modern readers. As far as we can gather from the preface, the entire poem—or one of them (for we really are not sure whether there is to be one or two)—is of a biographical nature, and is to contain the history of the author’s mind, and of the origin and progress of his poetical powers, up to the period when they were sufficiently matured to qualify him for the great work on which he has been so long employed. Now the quarto before us contains an account of one of his youthful rambles in the vales of Cumberland, and occupies precisely the period of three days! so that, by the use of a very powerful calculus, some estimate may be formed of the probable extent of the entire biography.

This small specimen, however, and the statements with which it is prefaced, have been sufficient to set our minds at rest in one particular. The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable, and beyond the power of criticism. We cannot indeed altogether omit taking precautions now and then against the spreading of the malady; but for himself, though we shall watch the progress of his symptoms as a matter of professional curiosity and instruction, we really think it right not to harass him any longer with nauseous remedies, but rather to throw in cordials and lenitives, and wait in patience for the natural termination of the disorder. In order to justify this desertion of our patient, however, it is proper to state

why we despair of the success of a more active practice.

A man who has been for twenty years at work on such matter as is now before us, and who comes complacently forward with a whole quarto of it, after all the admonitions he has received, cannot reasonably be expected to "change his hand, or check his pride," upon the suggestion of far weightier monitors than we can pretend to be. Inveterate habit must now have given a kind of sanctity to the errors of early taste, and the very powers of which we lament the perversion have probably become incapable of any other application. The very quantity, too, that he has written, and is at this moment working up for publication upon the old pattern, makes it almost hopeless to look for any change of it. All this is so much capital already sunk in the concern, which must be sacrificed if that be abandoned; and no man likes to give up for lost the time and talent and labor which he has embodied in any permanent production. We were not previously aware of these obstacles to Mr. Wordsworth's conversion, and, considering the peculiarities of his former writings merely as the result of certain wanton and capricious experiments on public taste and indulgence, conceived it to be our duty to discourage their repetition by all the means in our power. We now see clearly, however, how the case stands, and, making up our minds, though with the most sincere pain and reluctance, to consider him as finally lost to the good cause of poetry, shall endeavor to be thankful for the occasional gleams of tenderness and beauty which the natural force of his imagination and affections must still shed over all his productions, and to which we shall ever turn with delight, in spite of the affectation and mysticism and prolixity with which they are so abundantly contrasted.

Long habits of seclusion, and an excessive ambition of originality, can alone account for the disproportion which seems to exist between this author's taste and his genius, or for the devotion with which he has sacrificed so many precious gifts at the shrine of those paltry idols which he has set up for himself among his lakes and mountains. Solitary musings, amidst such scenes, might no doubt be expected to nurse up the mind to the majesty of poetical conception (though it is remarkable that all the greater

poets lived, or had lived, in the full current of society); but the collision of equal minds, the admonition of prevailing impressions, seems necessary to reduce its redundancies, and repress that tendency to extravagance or puerility, into which the self-indulgence and self-admiration of genius is so apt to be betrayed, when it is allowed to wanton, without awe or restraint, in the triumph and delight of its own intoxication. That its flights should be graceful and glorious in the eyes of men, it seems almost to be necessary that they should be made in the consciousness that men's eyes are to behold them, and that the inward transport and vigor by which they are inspired should be tempered by an occasional reference to what will be thought of them by those ultimate dispensers of glory. An habitual and general knowledge of the few settled and permanent maxims which form the canon of general taste in all large and polished societies—a certain tact, which informs us at once that many things which we still love and are moved by in secret must necessarily be despised as childish, or derided as absurd, in all such societies—though it will not stand in the place of genius, seems necessary to the success of its exertions, and, though it will never enable any one to produce the higher beauties of art, can alone secure the talent which does produce them from errors that must render it useless. Those who have most of the talent, however, commonly acquire this knowledge with the greatest facility; and if Mr. Wordsworth, instead of confining himself almost entirely to the society of the dalesmen and cottagers and little children who form the subjects of his book, had condescended to mingle a little more with the people that were to read and judge of it, we cannot help thinking that its texture would have been considerably improved. At least it appears to us to be absolutely impossible that any one who had lived or mixed familiarly with men of literature and ordinary judgment in poetry (of course we exclude the coadjutors and disciples of his own school) could ever have fallen into such gross faults, or so long mistaken them for beauties. His first essays we looked upon in a good degree as poetical paradoxes, maintained experimentally, in order to display talent and court notoriety, and so maintained with no more serious belief in

their truth than is usually generated by an ingenious and animated defence of other paradoxes. But when we find that he has been for twenty years exclusively employed upon articles of this very fabric, and that he has still enough raw material on hand to keep him so employed for twenty years to come, we cannot refuse him the justice of believing that he is a sincere convert to his own system, and must ascribe the peculiarities of his composition, not to any transient affectation or accidental caprice of imagination, but to a settled perversity of taste or understanding, which has been fostered, if not altogether created, by the circumstances to which we have alluded.

The volume before us, if we were to describe it very shortly, we should characterize as a tissue of moral and devotional ravings, in which innumerable changes are rung upon a few very simple and familiar ideas, but with such an accompaniment of long words, long sentences, and unwieldy phrases, and such a hubbub of strained raptures and fantastical sublimities, that it is often difficult for the most skilful and attentive student to obtain a glimpse of the author's meaning, and altogether impossible for an ordinary reader to conjecture what he is about. Moral and religious enthusiasm, though undoubtedly poetical emotions, are at the same time but dangerous inspirers of poetry; nothing being so apt to run into interminable dulness or mellifluous extravagance, without giving the unfortunate author the slightest intimation of his danger. His laudable zeal for the efficacy of his preachments he very naturally mistakes for the ardor of poetical inspiration, and, while dealing out the high words and glowing phrases which are so readily supplied by themes of this description, can scarcely avoid believing that he is eminently original and impressive. All sorts of commonplace notions and expressions are sanctified in his eyes by the sublime ends for which they are employed, and the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit is repeated, till the speaker entertains no doubt that he is the elected organ of divine truth and persuasion. But if such be the common hazards of seeking inspiration from those potent fountains, it may easily be conceived what chance Mr. Wordsworth had of escaping their enchant-

ment, with his natural propensities to wordiness, and his unlucky habit of debasing pathos with vulgarity. The fact accordingly is that in this production he is more obscure than a Pindaric poet of the seventeenth century,¹ and more verbose "than even himself of yore"; while the wilfulness with which he persists in choosing his examples of intellectual dignity and tenderness exclusively from the lowest ranks of society will be sufficiently apparent from the circumstance of his having thought fit to make his chief prolocutor in this poetical dialogue, and chief advocate of Providence and Virtue, *an old Scotch peddler*,—retired indeed from business, but still rambling about in his former haunts, and gossiping among his old customers, without his pack on his shoulders. The other persons of the drama are a retired military chaplain, who has grown half an atheist and half a misanthrope, the wife of an unprosperous weaver, a servant girl with her natural child, a parish pauper, and one or two other personages of equal rank and dignity.

The character of the work is decidedly didactic, and more than nine tenths of it are occupied with a species of dialogue, or rather a series of long sermons or harangues which pass between the peddler, the author, the old chaplain, and a worthy vicar who entertains the whole party at dinner on the last day of their excursion. The incidents which occur in the course of it are as few and trifling as can well be imagined, and those which the different speakers narrate in the course of their discourses are introduced rather to illustrate their arguments or opinions than for any interest they are supposed to possess of their own. The doctrine which the work is intended to enforce, we are by no means certain that we have discovered. In so far as we can collect, however, it seems to be neither more nor less than the old familiar one, that a firm belief in the providence of a wise and beneficent Being must be our great stay and support under all afflictions and perplexities upon earth, and that there are indications of his power and goodness in all the aspects of the visible universe, whether living or inanimate, every part of which should therefore be regarded with love

¹ Such as Abraham Cowley, and others who cultivated the "Pindaric ode."

and reverence, as exponents of those great attributes. We can testify, at least, that these salutary and important truths are inculcated at far greater length, and with more repetitions, than in any ten volumes of sermons that we ever perused. It is also maintained, with equal conciseness and originality, that there is frequently much good sense, as well as much enjoyment, in the humbler conditions of life, and that, in spite of great vices and abuses, there is a reasonable allowance both of happiness and goodness in society at large. If there be any deeper or more recondite doctrines in Mr. Wordsworth's book, we must confess that they have escaped us; and, convinced as we are of the truth and soundness of those to which we have alluded, we cannot help thinking that they might have been better enforced with less parade and prolixity. His effusions on what may be called the physiognomy of external nature, or its moral and theological expression, are eminently fantastic, obscure and affected.—It is quite time, however, that we should give the reader a more particular account of this singular performance.

It opens with a picture of the author toiling across a bare common in a hot summer day, and reaching at last a ruined hut surrounded with tall trees, where he meets by appointment with a hale old man, with an iron-pointed staff lying beside him. Then follows a retrospective account of their first acquaintance—formed, it seems, when the author was at a village school, and his aged friend occupied "one room,—the fifth part of a house" in the neighborhood. After this, we have the history of this reverend person at no small length. He was born, we are happy to find, in Scotland—among the hills of Athol; and his mother, after his father's death, married the parish schoolmaster, so that he was taught his letters betimes. But then, as it is here set forth with much solemnity,

From his sixth year, the boy of whom I speak
In summer tended cattle on the hills!

And again, a few pages after, that there may be no risk of mistake as to a point of such essential importance—

From early childhood, even, as hath been said,
 From his sixth year, he had been sent abroad,
 In summer—to tend herds! Such was his task!

In the course of this occupation it is next recorded that he acquired such a taste for rural scenery and open air that, when he was sent to teach a school in a neighboring village, he found it "a misery to him"; and determined to embrace the more romantic occupation of a peddler—or, as Mr. Wordsworth more musically expresses it,

A vagrant merchant, bent beneath his load;

—and in the course of his peregrinations had acquired a very large acquaintance, which, after he had given up dealing, he frequently took a summer ramble to visit.

The author, on coming up to this interesting personage, finds him sitting with his eyes half shut; and, not being quite sure whether he is asleep or awake, stands "some minutes' space" in silence beside him. "At length," says he, with his own delightful simplicity—

At length I hail'd him—seeing that his hat
 Was moist with water-drops, as if the brim
 Had newly scoop'd a running stream!
 . . . 'Tis, said I, 'a burning day!
 My lips are parch'd with thirst; but you, I guess,
 Have somewhere found relief.'

Upon this, the benevolent old man points him out, not a running stream, but a well in a corner, to which the author repairs; and, after minutely describing its situation, beyond a broken wall, and between two alders that "grew in a cold damp nook," he thus faithfully chronicles the process of his return:

My thirst I slak'd; and from the cheerless spot
 Withdrawing, straightway to the shade return'd,
 Where sate the old man on the cottage bench.

The Peddler then gives an account of the last inhabitants of the deserted cottage beside them. These were a good industrious weaver and his wife and children. They were very happy for a while, till sickness and want

of work came upon them; and then the father enlisted as a soldier, and the wife pined in that lonely cottage, growing every year more careless and desponding, as her anxiety and fears for her absent husband, of whom no tidings ever reached her, accumulated. Her children died, and left her cheerless and alone; and at last she died also; and the cottage fell to decay. We must say that there is very considerable pathos in the telling of this simple story, and that they who can get over the repugnance excited by the triteness of its incidents, and the lowness of its objects, will not fail to be struck with the author's knowledge of the human heart, and the power he possesses of stirring up its deepest and gentlest sympathies. His prolixity, indeed, it is not so easy to get over. This little story fills about twenty-five quarto pages, and abounds, of course, with mawkish sentiment and details of preposterous minuteness. When the tale is told, the travelers take their staffs, and end their first day's journey, without further adventure, at a little inn.

The Second Book sets them forward betimes in the morning. They pass by a village wake; and as they approach a more solitary part of the mountains, the old man tells the author that he is taking him to see an old friend of his, who had formerly been chaplain to a Highland regiment—had lost a beloved wife—been roused from his dejection by the first enthusiasm of the French Revolution—had emigrated, on its miscarriage, to America, and returned disgusted to hide himself in the retreat to which they were now ascending. That retreat is then most tediously described—a smooth green valley in the heart of the mountain, without trees, and with only one dwelling. Just as they get sight of it from the ridge above, they see a funeral train proceeding from the solitary abode, and hurry on with some apprehension for the fate of the amiable misanthrope—whom they find, however, in very tolerable condition at the door, and learn that the funeral was that of an aged pauper who had been boarded out by the parish in that cheap farmhouse, and had died in consequence of long exposure to heavy rain. The old chaplain, or, as Mr. Wordsworth is pleased to call him, the Solitary, tells this dull story at prodigious length; and after giving an inflated de-

scription of an effect of mountain mists in the evening sun, treats his visitors with a rustic dinner,—and they walk out to the fields at the close of the second book.

The Third makes no progress in the excursion. It is entirely filled with moral and religious conversation and debate, and with a more ample detail of the Solitary's past life than had been given in the sketch of his friend. The conversation is, in our judgment, exceedingly dull and mystical, and the Solitary's confessions insufferably diffuse. Yet there is occasionally very considerable force of writing and tenderness of sentiment in this part of the work.

The Fourth Book is also filled with dialogues, ethical and theological; and, with the exception of some brilliant and forcible expressions here and there, consists of an exposition of truisms, more cloudy, wordy, and inconceivably prolix than anything we ever met with.

In the beginning of the Fifth Book they leave the solitary valley, taking its pensive inhabitant along with them, and stray on to where the landscape sinks down into milder features, till they arrive at a church which stands on a moderate elevation in the center of a wide and fertile vale. Here they meditate for a while among the monuments, till the Vicar comes out and joins them; and, recognizing the Peddler for an old acquaintance, mixes graciously in the conversation, which proceeds in a very edifying manner till the close of the book.

The Sixth contains a choice obituary, or characteristic account of several of the persons who lie buried before this group of moralizers:—an unsuccessful lover, who had found consolation in natural history,—a miner, who worked on for twenty years, in despite of universal ridicule, and at last found the vein he had expected,—two political enemies reconciled in old age to each other,—an old female miser,—a seduced damsel,—and two widowers, one who had devoted himself to the education of his daughters, and one who had preferred marrying a prudent middle-aged woman to take care of them.

In the beginning of the Eighth Book the worthy vicar expresses, in the words of Mr. Wordsworth's own epitome, "his apprehensions that he had detained his auditors too long—invites them to his house—Solitary, disinclined to

comply, rallies the Wanderer, and somewhat playfully draws a comparison between his itinerant profession and that of a knight-errant—which leads to the Wanderer giving an account of changes in the country, from the manufacturing spirit—its favorable effects—the other side of the picture,” etc., etc. After these very poetical themes are exhausted, they all go into the house, where they are introduced to the vicar’s wife and daughter; and while they sit chatting in the parlor over a family dinner, his son and one of his companions come in with a fine dish of trouts piled on a blue slate, and, after being caressed by the company, are sent to dinner in the nursery. This ends the eighth book.

The Ninth and last is chiefly occupied with a mystical discourse of the Peddler, who maintains that the whole universe is animated by an active principle, the noblest seat of which is in the human soul, and moreover, that the final end of old age is to train and enable us

To hear the mighty stream of Tendency
Uttering, for elevation of our thought,
A clear sonorous voice, inaudible
To the vast multitude whose doom it is
To run the giddy round of vain delight—

with other matters as luminous and emphatic. The hostess at length breaks off the harangue by proposing that they should all make a little excursion on the lake, and they embark accordingly; and, after navigating for some time along its shores, and drinking tea on a little island, land at last on a remote promontory, from which they see the sun go down, and listen to a solemn and pious, but rather long, prayer from the vicar. They then walk back to the parsonage door, where the author and his friend propose to spend the evening; but the Solitary prefers walking back in the moonshine to his own valley, after promising to take another ramble with them,

If time, with free consent, be yours to give,
And season favours.

—And here the publication somewhat abruptly closes.² . . .

² The omitted portion of the review consists of specimen passages exemplifying the poet’s style, with comments.

Nobody can be more disposed to do justice to the great powers of Mr. Wordsworth than we are; and from the first time that he came before us down to the present moment we have uniformly testified in their favor, and assigned indeed our high sense of their value as the chief ground of the bitterness with which we resented their perversion. That perversion, however, is now far more visible than their original dignity; and while we collect the fragments, it is impossible not to mourn over the ruins from which we are condemned to pick them. If any one should doubt of the existence of such a perversion, or be disposed to dispute about the instances we have hastily brought forward, we would just beg leave to refer him to the general plan and character of the poem now before us. Why should Mr. Wordsworth have made his hero a superannuated peddler? What but the most wretched affectation, or provoking perversity of taste, could induce any one to place his chosen advocate of wisdom and virtue in so absurd and fantastic a condition? Did Mr. Wordsworth really imagine that his favorite doctrines were likely to gain anything in point of effect or authority by being put into the mouth of a person accustomed to higgler about tape or brass sleeve-buttons? Or is it not plain that, independent of the ridicule and disgust which such a personification must excite in many of his readers, its adoption exposes the work throughout to the charge of revolting incongruity and utter disregard of probability or nature? For, after he has thus wilfully debased his moral teacher by a low occupation, is there one word that he puts into his mouth, or one sentiment of which he makes him the organ, that has the most remote reference to that occupation? Is there anything in his learned, abstracted, and logical harangues that savors of the calling that is ascribed to him? Are any of their materials such as a peddler could possibly have dealt in? Are the manners, the diction, the sentiments, in any the very smallest degree accommodated to a person in that condition? or are they not eminently and conspicuously such as could not by possibility belong to it? A man who went about selling flannel and pocket-handkerchiefs in this lofty diction would soon frighten away all his customers, and would

infallibly pass either for a madman or for some learned and affected gentleman who, in a frolic, had taken up a character which he was peculiarly ill qualified for supporting.

The absurdity in this case, we think, is palpable and glaring; but it is exactly of the same nature with that which infects the whole substance of the work,—a puerile ambition of singularity engrafted on an unlucky predilection for truisms, and an affected passion for simplicity and humble life, most awkwardly combined with a taste for mystical refinements and all the gorgeousness of obscure phraseology. His taste for simplicity is evinced by sprinkling up and down his interminable declamations a few descriptions of baby-houses, and of old hats with wet brims; and his amiable partiality for humble life, by assuring us that a wordy rhetorician, who talks about Thebes and allegorizes all the heathen mythology, was once a peddler, and making him break in upon his magnificent orations with two or three awkward notices of something that he had seen when selling winter raiment about the country, or of the changes in the state of society which had almost annihilated his former calling.

MISS AUSTEN'S NOVELS

WALTER SCOTT

[This review (of *Emma*) appeared in the *Quarterly Review* for October, 1815. In the opening paragraphs Scott briefly and banteringly discussed the popularity of prose fiction.]

. . . In its first appearance, the novel was the legitimate child of the romance; and though the manners and general turn of the composition were altered so as to suit modern times, the author remained fettered by many peculiarities derived from the original style of romantic fiction. These may be chiefly traced in the conduct of the narrative, and the tone of sentiment attributed to the fictitious personages. On the first point, although

The talisman and magic wand were broke,
Knights, dwarfs, and genii vanish'd into smoke,

still the reader expected to peruse a course of adventures of a nature more interesting and extraordinary than those which occur in his own life or that of his next-door neighbors. The hero no longer defeated armies by his single sword, clove giants to the chins, or gained kingdoms. But he was expected to go through perils by sea and land, to be steeped in poverty, to be tried by temptation, to be exposed to the alternate vicissitudes of adversity and prosperity, and his life was a troubled scene of suffering and achievement. Few novelists, indeed, adventured to deny to the hero his final hour of tranquillity and happiness, though it was the prevailing fashion never to relieve him out of his last and most dreadful distress until the finishing chapters of his history; so that, although his prosperity in the record of his life was short, we were bound to believe it was long and uninterrupted when the author had done with him. The heroine was usually condemned to equal hardships and hazards. She was regularly exposed to being forcibly carried off like a Sabine virgin by some frantic admirer. And even if she escaped the terrors of masked ruffians, an insidious ravisher, a cloak wrapped forcibly around her head, and a coach with the blinds up driving she could not conjecture whither, she had still her share of wandering, of poverty, of obloquy, of seclusion, and of imprisonment, and was frequently extended upon a bed of sickness, and reduced to her last shilling before the author condescended to shield her from persecution. In all these dread contingencies the mind of the reader was expected to sympathize, since by incidents so much beyond the bounds of his ordinary experience his wonder and interest ought at once to be excited. But gradually he became familiar with the land of fiction, the adventures of which he assimilated not with those of real life, but with each other. Let the distress of the hero or heroine be ever so great, the reader reposed an imperturbable confidence in the talents of the author, who, as he had plunged them into distress, would in his own good time, and when things, as Tony Lumpkin says, were in a concatenation accordingly, bring his favorites out of all their troubles. Mr. Crabbe has expressed his own and our feelings excellently on this subject:

For should we grant these beauties all endure
 Severest pangs, they've still the speediest cure;
 Before one charm be wither'd from the face,
 Except the bloom which shall again have place,
 In wedlock ends each wish, in triumph all disgrace;
 And life to come, we fairly may suppose,
 One light bright contrast to these wild dark woes.¹

In short, the author of novels was, in former times, expected to tread pretty much in the limits between the concentric circles of probability and possibility; and as he was not permitted to transgress the latter, his narrative, to make amends, almost always went beyond the bounds of the former. Now although it may be urged that the vicissitudes of human life have occasionally led an individual through as many scenes of singular fortune as are represented in the most extravagant of these fictions, still the causes and personages acting on these changes have varied with the progress of the adventurer's fortune, and do not present that combined plot (the object of every skilful novelist) in which all the more interesting individuals of the *dramatis personæ* have their appropriate share in the action and in bringing about the catastrophe. Here, even more than in its various and violent changes for fortune, rests the improbability of the novel. The life of man rolls forth like a stream from the fountain, or it spreads out into tranquillity like a placid or stagnant lake. In the latter case, the individual grows old among the characters with whom he was born, and is contemporary,—shares precisely the sort of weal and woe to which his birth destined him,—moves in the same circle,—and, allowing for the change of seasons, is influenced by and influences the same class of persons by which he was originally surrounded. The man of mark and of adventure, on the contrary, resembles in the course of his life the river whose mid-current and discharge into the ocean are widely removed from each other, as well as from the rocks and wild flowers which its fountains first reflected; violent changes of time, of place, and of circumstances hurry him forward from one scene to another, and his adventures will usually be

¹ From *The Borough*, xx ("Ellen Orford").

found only connected with each other because they have happened to the same individual. Such a history resembles an ingenious, fictitious narrative, exactly in the degree in which an old dramatic chronicle of the life and death of some distinguished character, where all the various agents appear and disappear as in the page of history, approaches a regular drama, in which every person introduced plays an appropriate part, and every point of the action tends to one common catastrophe.

We return to the second broad line of distinction between the novel, as formerly composed, and real life,—the difference, namely, of the sentiments. The novelist professed to give an imitation of nature, but it was, as the French say, *la belle nature*. Human beings, indeed, were presented, but in the most sentimental mood, and with minds purified by a sensibility which often verged on extravagance. In the serious class of novels, the hero was usually

A knight of love, who never broke a vow.

And although in those of a more humorous cast he was permitted a license, borrowed either from real life or from the libertinism of the drama, still a distinction was demanded even from *Peregrine Pickle*, or *Tom Jones*;² and the hero, in every folly of which he might be guilty, was studiously vindicated from the charge of infidelity of the heart. The heroine was, of course, still more immaculate; and to have conferred her affections upon any other than the lover to whom the reader had destined her from their first meeting would have been a crime against sentiment which no author of moderate prudence would have hazarded, under the old *régime*.

Here, therefore, we have two essential and important circumstances in which the earlier novels differed from those now in fashion, and were more nearly assimilated to the old romances. And there can be no doubt that, by the studied involution and extrication of the story, by the combination of incidents new, striking, and wonderful beyond the course of ordinary life, the former

² *Peregrine Pickle* by Smollet, 1751; *Tom Jones* by Fielding, 1749.

authors opened that obvious and strong sense of interest which arises from curiosity; as by the pure, elevated, and romantic cast of the sentiment they conciliated those better propensities of our nature, which loves to contemplate the picture of virtue, even when confessedly unable to imitate its excellences.

But strong and powerful as these sources of emotion and interest may be, they are, like all others, capable of being exhausted by habit. The imitators who rushed in crowds upon each path in which the great masters of the art had successively led the way, produced upon the public mind the usual effect of satiety. The first writer of a new class is, as it were, placed on a pinnacle of excellence, to which, at the earliest glance of a surprised admirer, his ascent seems little less than miraculous. Time and imitation speedily diminish the wonder, and each successive attempt establishes a kind of progressive scale of ascent between the lately deified author and the reader who had deemed his excellence inaccessible. The stupidity, the mediocrity, the merit of his imitators, are alike fatal to the first inventor, by showing how possible it is to exaggerate his faults and to come within a certain point of his beauties.

Materials also (and the man of genius as well as his wretched imitator must work with the same) become stale and familiar. Social life, in our civilized days, affords few instances capable of being painted in the strong dark colors which excite surprise and horror; and robbers, smugglers, bailiffs, caverns, dungeons, and mad-houses have been all introduced until they ceased to interest. And thus in the novel, as in every style of composition which appeals to the public taste, the more rich and easily worked mines being exhausted, the adventurous author must, if he is desirous of success, have recourse to those which were disdained by his predecessors as unproductive, or avoided as only capable of being turned to profit by great skill and labor. Accordingly a style of novel has arisen, within the last fifteen or twenty years, differing from the former in the points upon which the interest hinges; neither alarming our credulity nor amusing our imagination by wild variety of incident, or by those pictures of romantic affection and sensibility which

were formerly as certain attributes of fictitious characters as they are of rare occurrence among those who actually live and die. The substitute for these excitements, which had lost much of their poignancy by the repeated and injudicious use of them, was the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him.

In adventuring upon this task, the author makes obvious sacrifices, and encounters peculiar difficulty. He who paints from *le beau idéal*, if his scenes and sentiments are striking and interesting, is in a great measure exempted from the difficult task of reconciling them with the ordinary probabilities of life; but he who paints a scene of common occurrence places his composition within that extensive range of criticism which general experience offers to every reader. The resemblance of a statue of Hercules we must take on the artist's judgment; but every one can criticize that which is presented as the portrait of a friend or neighbor. Something more than a mere sign-post likeness is also demanded. The portrait must have spirit and character, as well as resemblance; and being deprived of all that, according to Bayes,³ goes "to elevate and surprise," it must make amends by displaying depth of knowledge and dexterity of execution. We therefore bestow no mean compliment upon the author of *Emma*, when we say that, keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events, arising from the consideration of minds, manners, and sentiments greatly above our own. In this class she stands almost alone; for the scenes of Miss Edgeworth are laid in higher life, varied by more romantic incident, and by her remarkable power of embodying and illustrating national character. But the author of *Emma* confines herself chiefly to the middling classes of society; her most

³ A dramatist represented, partly in ridicule of Dryden, in the Duke of Buckingham's comedy *The Rehearsal*, 1671.

distinguished characters do not rise greatly above well-bred country gentlemen and ladies; and those which are sketched with most originality and precision belong to a class rather below that standard. The narrative of all her novels is composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks; and her *dramatis personæ* conduct themselves upon the motives and principles which the readers may recognize as ruling their own and that of most of their acquaintances. The kind of moral, also, which these novels inculcate applies equally to the paths of common life, as will best appear from a short notice of the author's former works, with a more full abstract of that which we at present have under consideration.

Sense and Sensibility, the first of these compositions, contains the history of two sisters. The elder, a young lady of prudence and regulated feelings, becomes gradually attached to a man of an excellent heart and limited talents, who happens unfortunately to be fettered by a rash and ill-assorted engagement. In the younger sister the influence of sensibility and imagination predominates; and she, as was to be expected, also falls in love, but with more unbridled and wilful passion. Her lover, gifted with all the qualities of exterior polish and vivacity, proves faithless, and marries a woman of large fortune. The interest and merit of the piece depend altogether upon the behavior of the elder sister, while obliged at once to sustain her own disappointment with fortitude, and to support her sister, who abandons herself, with unsuppressed feelings, to the indulgence of grief. The marriage of the unworthy rival at length relieves her own lover from his imprudent engagement; while her sister, turned wise by precept, example, and experience, transfers her affection to a very respectable and somewhat too serious admirer, who had nourished an unsuccessful passion through the three volumes.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the author presents us with a family of young women, bred up under a foolish and vulgar mother, and a father whose good abilities lay hid under such a load of indolence and insensibility that he had become contented to make the foibles and follies of his wife and daughters the subject of dry and humorous

sarcasm, rather than of admonition or restraint. This is one of the portraits from ordinary life which shows our author's talents in a very strong point of view. A friend of ours, whom the author never saw or heard of, was at once recognized by his own family as the original of Mr. Bennett, and we do not know if he has yet got rid of the nickname. A Mr. Collins, too, a formal, conceited, yet servile young sprig of divinity, is drawn with the same force and precision. The story of the piece consists chiefly in the fates of the second sister, to whom a man of high birth, large fortune, but haughty and reserved manners, becomes attached, in spite of the discredit thrown upon the object of his affection by the vulgarity and ill conduct of her relations. The lady, on the contrary, hurt at the contempt of her connections, which the lover does not even attempt to suppress, and prejudiced against him on other accounts, refuses the hand which he ungraciously offers, and does not perceive that she has done a foolish thing until she accidentally visits a very handsome seat and grounds belonging to her admirer. They chance to meet, exactly as her prudence had begun to subdue her prejudice; and after some essential services rendered to her family, the lover becomes encouraged to renew his addresses, and the novel ends happily.

Emma has even less story than either of the preceding novels. Miss Emma Woodhouse, from whom the book takes its name, is the daughter of a gentleman of wealth and consequence residing at his seat in the immediate vicinage of a country village called Highbury. The father, a good-natured, silly valetudinary, abandons the management of his household to Emma, he himself being only occupied by his summer and winter walk, his apothecary, his gruel, and his whist table. The latter is supplied from the neighboring village of Highbury with precisely the sort of persons who occupy the vacant corners of a regular whist table, when a village is in the neighborhood and better cannot be found within the family. We have the smiling and courteous vicar, who nourishes the ambitious hope of obtaining Miss Woodhouse's hand. We have Mrs. Bates, the wife of a former rector, past everything but tea and whist; her daughter, Miss

Bates, a good-natured, vulgar, and foolish old maid; Mr. Weston, a gentleman of a frank disposition and moderate fortune, in the vicinity, and his wife, an amiable and accomplished person, who had been Emma's governess and is devotedly attached to her. Amongst all these personages Miss Woodhouse walks forth, the princess paramount, superior to all her companions in wit, beauty, fortune, and accomplishments, doted upon by her father and the Westons, admired, and almost worshiped by the more humble companions of the whist table. The object of most young ladies is, or at least is usually supposed to be, a desirable connection in marriage. But Emma Woodhouse, either anticipating the taste of a later period of life, or, like a good sovereign, preferring the weal of her subjects of Highbury to her own private interest, sets generously about making matches for her friends, without thinking of matrimony on her own account. We are informed that she had been eminently successful in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Weston; and when the novel commences she is exerting her influence in favor of Miss Harriet Smith, a boarding-school girl without family or fortune, very good-humored, very pretty, very silly, and, what suited Miss Woodhouse's purpose best of all, very much disposed to be married. In these conjugal machinations Emma is frequently interrupted, not only by the cautions of her father, who had a particular objection to anybody committing the rash act of matrimony, but also by the sturdy reproof and remonstrances of Mr. Knightley, the elder brother of her sister's husband, a sensible country gentleman of thirty-five, who had known Emma from her cradle, and was the only person who ventured to find fault with her. In spite, however, of his censure and warning, Emma lays a plan of marrying Harriet Smith to the vicar; and though she succeeds perfectly in diverting her simple friend's thoughts from an honest farmer who had made her a very suitable offer, and in flattering her into a passion for Mr. Elton, yet on the other hand that conceited divine totally mistakes the nature of the encouragement held out to him, and attributes the favor which he found in Miss Woodhouse's eyes to a lurking affection on her own part. This at length encourages him to a presumptuous declaration of

his sentiments; upon receiving a repulse, he looks abroad elsewhere, and enriches the Highbury society by uniting himself to a dashing young woman with as many thousands as are usually called ten, and a corresponding quantity of presumption and ill breeding. While Emma is thus vainly engaged in forging wedlock fetters for others, her friends have views of the same kind upon her, in favor of a son of Mr. Weston by a former marriage, who bears the name, lives under the patronage, and is to inherit the fortune, of a rich uncle. Unfortunately Mr. Frank Churchill had already settled his affections on Miss Jane Fairfax, a young lady of reduced fortune; but as this was a concealed affair, Emma, when Mr. Churchill first appears on the stage, has some thoughts of being in love with him herself; speedily, however, recovering from that dangerous propensity, she is disposed to confer upon him her deserted friend Harriet Smith. Harriet has, in the interim, fallen desperately in love with Mr. Knightley, the sturdy, advice-giving bachelor; and, as all the village supposes Frank Churchill and Emma to be attached to each other, there are cross purposes enough (were the novel of a more romantic cast) for cutting half the men's throats and breaking all the women's hearts. But at Highbury Cupid walks decorously, and with good discretion, bearing his torch under a lantern instead of flourishing it around to set the house on fire. All these entanglements bring on only a train of mistakes and embarrassing situations, and dialogues at balls and parties of pleasure, in which the author displays her peculiar powers of humor and knowledge of human life. The plot is extricated with great simplicity. The aunt of Frank Churchill dies; his uncle, no longer under her baneful influence, consents to his marriage with Jane Fairfax. Mr. Knightley and Emma are led, by this unexpected incident, to discover that they had been in love with each other all along. Mr. Woodhouse's objections to the marriage of his daughter are overpowered by the fears of house-breakers, and the comfort which he hopes to derive from having a stout son-in-law resident in the family; and the facile affections of Harriet Smith are transferred, like a bank bill by endorsement, to her former suitor, the honest farmer, who had obtained a favorable opportunity

of renewing his addresses. Such is the simple plan of a story which we peruse with pleasure, if not with deep interest, and which perhaps we might more willingly resume than one of those narratives where the attention is strongly riveted, during the first perusal, by the powerful excitement of curiosity.

The author's knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.⁴ . . .

DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE AUTHOR OF "WAVERLEY" AND CAPTAIN CLUTTERBUCK.

WALTER SCOTT

[Scott had playfully prefaced the romance of *The Monastery*, 1820, with an epistle supposed to be written by Captain Cuthbert Clutterbuck of Kennaquhair, who was represented as having furnished the author of *Waverley* the materials of the story in an ancient manuscript. *The Fortunes of Nigel*, 1822, was prefaced by a letter from Captain Clutterbuck to Dr. Dryasdust, in which the writer related how he had lately met the Author of *Waverley* for the first time in a remote room in an Edinburgh publishing house, and engaged in the following dialogue. It should be recalled that at the time these books were published the authorship of the *Waverley* Novels was still a secret.]

Author. I was willing to see you, Captain Clutterbuck, being the person of my family whom I have most regard for, since the death of Jedediah Cleishbotham;¹ and I am afraid I may have done you some wrong, in assigning to you *The Monastery* as a portion of my effects. I have some thoughts of making it up to you by naming

⁴In the paragraphs that follow, Scott quotes a specimen of Miss Austen's dialogue, praising its fidelity to real life, but querying whether, in the case of tedious characters, such fidelity may not itself become tedious.

¹The imaginary compiler of Scott's *Tales of My Landlord*.

you godfather to this yet unborn babe. But first, touching *The Monastery*,—how says the world?—you are abroad and can learn.

Captain. Hem! Hem!—the inquiry is delicate. I have not heard any complaints from the publishers.

Author. That is the principal matter; but yet an indifferent work is sometimes towed on by those which have left harbor before it, with the breeze in their poop. What say the critics?

Captain. There is a general—feeling—that the White Lady is no favorite.

Author. I think she is a failure myself, but rather in execution than conception. Could I have evoked an *esprit follet*,² at the same time fantastic and interesting, capricious and kind—a sort of wildfire of the elements, bound by no fixed laws or motives of action—faithful and fond, yet teasing and uncertain—

Captain. If you will pardon the interruption, sir, I think you are describing a pretty woman.

Author. On my word, I believe I am. I must invest my elementary spirits with a little human flesh and blood—they are too fine-drawn for the present taste of the public.

Captain. They object, too, that the object of your Nixie ought to have been more uniformly noble. Her ducking the priest³ was no Naiad-like amusement.

Author. Ah! they ought to allow for the capriccios of what is, after all, but a better sort of goblin. The bath into which Ariel, the most delicate creation of Shakespeare's imagination, seduces our jolly friend Trinculo,⁴ was not of amber or rose-water. But no one shall find me rowing against the stream. I care not who knows it—I write for general amusement; and, though I never will aim at popularity by what I think unworthy means, I will not, on the other hand, be pertinacious in the defence of my own errors against the voice of the public.

Captain. You abandon, then, in the present work, the mystic, and the magical, and the whole system of signs,

² Elfin Sprite.

³ See *The Monastery*, chapter v.

⁴ See *The Tempest*, IV. i. 181-84.

wonders, and omens? There are no dreams, or presages, or obscure allusions to future events?

Author. Not a Cock Lane scratch, my son—not one bounce on the drum of Tedworth⁵—not so much as the poor tick of a solitary death-watch in the wainscot. All is clear and above board—a Scots metaphysician might believe every word of it.

Captain. And the story is, I hope, natural and probable; commencing strikingly, proceeding naturally, ending happily—like the course of a famed river, which gushes from the mouth of some obscure and romantic grotto, then gliding on, never pausing, never precipitating its course, visiting, as it were, by natural instinct, whatever worthy subjects of interest are presented by the country through which it passes—widening and deepening in interest as it flows on; and at length arriving at the final catastrophe as at some mighty haven, where ships of all kinds strike sail and yard?

Author. Hey! hey! what the deuce is all this? Why, 'tis 'Ercles' vein,⁶ and it would require some one much more like Hercules than I to produce a story which should gush, and glide, and never pause, and visit, and widen, and deepen, and all the rest on't. I should be chin-deep in the grave, man, before I had done with my task; and, in the meanwhile, all the quirks and quiddities which I might have devised for my reader's amusement would lie rotting in my gizzard, like Sancho's suppressed witticisms when he was under his master's displeasure.⁷ There was never a novel written on this plan while the world stood.

Captain. Pardon me—*Tom Jones.*

Author. True, and perhaps *Amelia* also. Fielding had high notions of the dignity of an art which he may be considered as having founded. He challenges a comparison between the Novel and the Epic.⁸ Smollett, Le Sage, and others, emancipating themselves from the strict-

⁵ At Cock Lane, in Dr. Johnson's time, there was supposed to be a notable ghost. In 1661 a drummer of Tedworth was supposed to have employed agencies of the devil to persecute an enemy by means of mysterious noises in his house.

⁶ See *Midsummer Night's Dream*, I, ii, 42.

⁷ In *Don Quixote*, *passim*.

⁸ See Fielding's Preface to *Joseph Andrews*.

ness of the rules he has laid down, have written rather a history of the miscellaneous adventures which befall an individual in the course of life, than the plot of a regular and connected epopeia, where every step brings us a point nearer to the final catastrophe. These great masters have been satisfied if they amused the reader upon the road, though the conclusion only arrived because the tale must have an end—just as the traveler alights at the inn because it is evening.

Captain. A very commodious mode of traveling, for the author at least. In short, sir, you are of opinion with Bayes—"What the devil does the plot signify, except to bring in fine things?"⁹

Author. Grant that I were so, and that I should write with sense and spirit a few scenes, unlabored and loosely put together, but which had sufficient interest in them to amuse in one corner the pain of body; in another, to relieve anxiety of mind; in a third place, to unwrinkle a brow bent with the furrows of daily toil; in another, to fill the place of bad thoughts, or to suggest better; in yet another, to induce an idler to study the history of his country; in all, save where the perusal interrupted the discharge of serious duties, to furnish harmless amusement—might not the author of such a work, however artificially executed, plead for his errors and negligences the excuse of the slave who, about to be punished for having spread the false report of a victory, saved himself by exclaiming, "Am I to blame, O Athenians, who have given you one happy day?" . . .

Captain. But allowing, my dear sir, that you care not for your personal reputation, or for that of any literary person upon whose shoulders your faults may be visited, allow me to say that common gratitude to the public, which has received you so kindly, and to the critics, who have treated you so leniently, ought to induce you to bestow more pains on your story.

Author. I do entreat you, my son, as Dr. Johnson would have said, "free your mind from cant." For the critics, they have their business, and I mine; as the nursery proverb goes—

⁹ In Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, III, 1.

The children in Holland take pleasure in making
What the children in England take pleasure in breaking.

I am their humble jackal, too busy providing food for them to have time for considering whether they swallow or reject it. To the public I stand pretty nearly in the relation of the postman who leaves a packet at the door of an individual. If it contains pleasing intelligence—a billet from a mistress, a letter from an absent son, a remittance from a correspondent supposed to be bankrupt—the letter is acceptably welcome, and read and re-read, folded up, filed, and safely deposited in the bureau. If the contents are disagreeable, if it comes from a dun or from a bore, the correspondent is cursed, the letter is thrown into the fire, and the expense of postage is heartily regretted; while all the time the bearer of the dispatches is, in either case, as little thought on as the snow of last Christmas. The utmost extent of kindness between the author and the public which can really exist, is that the world are disposed to be somewhat indulgent to the succeeding works of an original favorite, were it but on account of the habit which the public mind has acquired; while the author very naturally thinks well of their taste who have so liberally applauded his productions. But I deny there is any call for gratitude, properly so called, either on one side or the other.

Captain. Respect to yourself, then, ought to teach caution.

Author. Ay, if caution could augment the chance of my success. But, to confess to you the truth, the works and passages in which I have succeeded have uniformly been written with the greatest rapidity; and when I have seen some of these placed in opposition with others, and commended as more highly finished, I could appeal to pen and standish that the parts in which I have come feebly off were by much the more labored. Besides, I doubt the beneficial effect of too much delay, both on account of the author and the public. A man should strike while the iron is hot, and hoist sail while the wind is fair. If a successful author keep not the stage, another instantly takes his ground. If a writer lie by for ten years ere he produces a second work, he is superseded by

others; or, if the age is so poor of genius that this does not happen, his own reputation becomes his greatest obstacle. The public will expect the new work to be ten times better than its predecessor; the author will expect it should be ten times more popular; and 'tis a hundred to ten that both are disappointed.

Captain. This may justify a certain degree of rapidity in publication, but not that which is proverbially said to be no speed. You should take time at least to arrange your story.

Author. That is a sore point with me, my son. Believe me, I have not been fool enough to neglect ordinary precautions. I have repeatedly laid down my future work to scale, divided it into volumes and chapters, and endeavored to construct a story which I meant should evolve itself gradually and strikingly, maintain suspense, and stimulate curiosity; and which, finally, should terminate in a striking catastrophe. But I think there is a demon who seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it astray from the purpose. Characters expand under my hand; incidents are multiplied; the story lingers, while the materials increase; my regular mansion turns out a Gothic anomaly, and the work is closed long before I have attained the point I proposed.

Captain. Resolution and determined forbearance might remedy that evil.

Author. Alas! my dear sir, you do not know the force of paternal affection. When I light on such a character as Bailie Jarvie, or Dalgetty,¹⁰ my imagination brightens, and my conception becomes clearer at every step which I take in his company, although it leads me many a weary mile away from the regular road, and forces me to leap hedge and ditch to get back into the route again. If I resist the temptation, as you advise me, my thoughts become prosy, flat, and dull; I write painfully to myself, and under a consciousness of flagging which makes me flag still more; the sunshine with which fancy had invested the incidents departs from them, and leaves everything dull and gloomy. I am no more the same author I

¹⁰ Jarvie in *Rob Roy*, Dalgetty in *A Legend of Montrose*.

was in my better mood than the dog in a wheel, condemned to go round and round for hours, is like the same dog merrily chasing his own tail, and gamboling in all the frolic of unrestrained freedom. In short, sir, on such occasions, I think I am bewitched.

Captain. Nay, sir, if you plead sorcery, there is no more to be said—he must needs go whom the devil drives. And this, I suppose, sir, is the reason why you do not make the theatrical attempt to which you have been so often urged?

Author. It may pass for one good reason for not writing a play, that I cannot form a plot. But the truth is, that the idea adopted by too favorable judges, of my having some aptitude for that department of poetry, has been much founded on those scraps of old plays which, being taken from a source inaccessible to collectors, they have hastily considered the offspring of my mother wit.¹¹ . . .

Captain. You are determined to proceed then in your own system? Are you aware that an unworthy motive may be assigned for this rapid succession of publication? You will be supposed to work merely for the lucre of gain.

Author. Supposing that I did permit the great advantages which must be derived from success in literature to join with other motives in inducing me to come more frequently before the public, that emolument is the voluntary tax which the public pays for a certain species of literary amusement—it is extorted from no one, and paid, I presume, by those only who can afford it, and who receive gratification in proportion to the expense. If the capital sum which these volumes have put into circulation be a very large one, has it contributed to my indulgences only? or can I not say to hundreds, from honest Duncan, the paper manufacturer, to the most sniveling of the printer's devils, "Didst thou not share? Hadst thou not fifteen pence?"¹² I profess I think our Modern Athens much obliged to me for having established such an extensive manufacture; and when universal suffrage comes in fashion, I intend to stand for a seat in the

¹¹ Scott actually composed many of these professed quotations, using them as chapter-headings in his romances.

¹² See *Merry Wives of Windsor*, II, ii, 14.

House on the interest of all the unwashed artificers connected with literature.

Captain. This would be called the language of a calico manufacturer.

Author. Cant again, my dear son—there is lime in this sack, too¹³—nothing but sophistication in this world! I do say it, in spite of Adam Smith and his followers, that a successful author is a productive laborer, and that his works constitute as effectual part of the public wealth as that which is created by any other manufacture. If a new commodity, having an actually intrinsic and commercial value, be the result of the operation, why are the author's bales of books to be esteemed a less profitable part of the public stock than the goods of any other manufacturer? I speak with reference to the diffusion of the wealth arising to the public, and the degree of industry which even such a trifling work as the present must stimulate and reward, before the volumes leave the publisher's shop. Without me it could not exist, and to this extent I am a benefactor to the country. As for my own emolument, it is won by my toil, and I account myself answerable to Heaven only for the mode in which I expend it. The candid may hope it is not all dedicated to selfish purposes; and, without much pretensions to merit in him who disburses it, a part may "wander, Heaven-directed, to the poor."

Captain. Yet it is generally held base to write from the mere motives of gain.

Author. It would be base to do so exclusively, or even to make it a principal motive for literary exertion. Nay, I will venture to say that no work of imagination proceeding from the mere consideration of a certain sum of copy-money ever did, or ever will, succeed. So the lawyer who pleads, the soldier who fights, the physician who prescribes, the clergyman—if such there be—who preaches, without any zeal for his profession, or without any sense of its dignity, and merely on account of the fee, pay, or stipend, degrade themselves to the rank of sordid mechanics. Accordingly, in the case of two of the learned faculties at least, their services are considered as unappreci-

¹³ See 1 *Henry IV*, II, iv, 137.

able, and are acknowledged, not by any exact estimate of the services rendered, but by a *honorarium*, or voluntary acknowledgment. But let a client or patient make the experiment of omitting this little ceremony of the *honorarium*, which is *censé* to be a thing entirely out of consideration between them, and mark how the learned gentleman will look upon his case. Cant set apart, it is the same thing with literary emolument. No man of sense in any rank of life is, or ought to be, above accepting a just recompense for his time, and a reasonable share of the capital which owes its very existence to his exertions. When Czar Peter wrought in the trenches, he took the pay of a common soldier; and nobles, statesmen, and divines, the most distinguished of their time, have not scorned to square accounts with their bookseller.

Captain (sings).

Oh if it were a mean thing,
The gentles would not use it;
And if it were ungodly,
The clergy would refuse it.¹⁴

Author. You say well. But no man of honor, genius, or spirit would make the mere love of gain the chief, far less the only, purpose of his labors. For myself, I am not displeased to find the game a winning one; yet while I pleased the public, I should probably continue it merely for the pleasure of playing, for I have felt as strongly as most folks that love of composition which is perhaps the strongest of all instincts, driving the author to the pen, the painter to the palette, often without either the chance of fame or the prospect of reward. Perhaps I have said too much of this. I might, perhaps, with as much truth as most people, exculpate myself from the charge of being either of a greedy or mercenary disposition; but I am not, therefore, hypocrite enough to disclaim the ordinary motives on account of which the whole world around me is toiling unremittingly, to the sacrifice of ease, comfort, health, and life. I do not affect the disinterestedness of that ingenious association of gentlemen mentioned by Goldsmith, who sold their magazine for sixpence apiece, merely for their own amusement.

¹⁴ From an old Scotch song, "Some say that kissing's a sin."

Captain. I have but one thing more to hint—the world say you will run yourself out.

Author. The world say true; and what then? When they dance no longer, I will no longer pipe; and I shall not want flappers enough to remind me of the apoplexy.

Captain. And what will become of us then, your poor family? We shall fall into contempt and oblivion.

Author. Like many a poor fellow, already overwhelmed with the number of his family, I cannot help going on to increase it—"Tis my vocation, Hal."¹⁵ Such of you as deserve oblivion—perhaps the whole of you—may be consigned to it. At any rate, you have been read in your day, which is more than can be said of some of your contemporaries, of less fortune and more merit. They cannot say but that you *had* the crown. It is always something to have engaged the public attention for seven years. Had I only written *Waverley*, I should have long since been, according to the established phrase, "the ingenious author of a novel much admired at the time." I believe, on my soul, that the reputation of *Waverley* is sustained very much by the praises of those who may be inclined to prefer that tale to its successors.

Captain. You are willing, then, to barter future reputation for present popularity?

Author. *Meliora spero.*¹⁶ Horace himself expected not to survive in all his works. I may hope to live in some of mine—*non omnis moriar.*¹⁷ It is some consolation to reflect that the best authors in all countries have been the most voluminous; and it has often happened that those who have been best received in their own time have also continued to be acceptable to posterity. I do not think so ill of the present generation as to suppose that its present favor necessarily infers future condemnation.

Captain. Were all to act on such principles, the public would be inundated.

Author. Once more, my dear son, beware of cant. You speak as if the public were obliged to read books merely because they are printed. Your friends the book-

¹⁵ See 1 *Henry IV*, I, ii, 116.

¹⁶ "I hope for better things"; the motto of the house of Stormont.

¹⁷ "I shall not wholly die" (Horace, *Odes*, III, 30).

sellers would thank you to make the proposition good. The most serious grievance attending such inundations as you talk of, is that they make rags dear. The multiplicity of publications does the present age no harm, and may greatly advantage that which is to succeed us.

Captain. I do not see how that is to happen.

Author. The complaints in the time of Elizabeth and James, of the alarming fertility of the press, were as loud as they are at present; yet look at the shore over which the inundation of that age flowed, and it resembles now the Rich Strand of the *Faerie Queene*—

Bestrew'd all with rich array,
Of pearl and precious stones of great assay;
And all the gravel mix'd with golden ore.¹⁸

Believe me that even in the most neglected works of the present age the next may discover treasures.

Captain. Some books will defy all alchemy.

Author. They will be but few in number, since, as for writers who are possessed of no merit at all, unless indeed they publish their works at their own expense, like Sir Richard Blackmore,¹⁹ their power of annoying the public will be soon limited by the difficulty of finding undertaking booksellers.

Captain. You are incorrigible. Are there no bounds to your audacity?

Author. There are the sacred and eternal boundaries of honor and virtue. My course is like the enchanted chamber of Britomart—

Where, as she look'd about, she did behold
How over that same door was likewise writ,
Be Bold—Be Bold, and everywhere *Be bold*.
Whereat she mused, and could not construe it;
At last she spied, at that room's upper end,
Another iron door, on which was writ,
Be not too Bold.²⁰

Captain. Well, you must take the risk of proceeding on your own principles.

¹⁸ *Faerie Queene*, III, iv, stanza 18.

¹⁹ Author of a number of unsuccessful poems; died 1729.

²⁰ *Faerie Queene*, III, xi, stanza 54.

Author. Do you act on yours; and take care you do not stay idling here till the dinner hour is over. I will add this work to your patrimony, *valeat quantum*.²¹

IMAGINATION AND FANCY

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

[This, like the two following selections, is an extract from the miscellany called *Biographia Literaria*, published 1817. Coleridge viewed his distinction between Imagination and Fancy as an original contribution of the first importance (see the Introduction, page xi), but after repeated approaches to it in various chapters of the *Biographia*, he abandoned the effort to expound it fully. The selection is made up from the passages dealing with the subject in chapters 4, 12, and 13.]

Repeated meditations led me first to suspect (and a more intimate analysis of the human faculties, their appropriate marks, functions, and effects, matured my conjecture into full conviction) that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or, at furthest, the lower and higher degree of one and the same power. It is not, I own, easy to conceive a more opposite translation of the Greek *phantasia* than the Latin *imaginatio*; but it is equally true that in all societies there exists an instinct of growth, a certain collective, unconscious good sense working progressively to desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning, which the conflux of dialects had supplied to the more homogeneous languages, as the Greek and German, and which the same cause, joined with accidents of translation from original works of different countries, occasion in mixed languages like our own. The first and most important point to be proved is that two conceptions perfectly distinct are confused under one and the same word, and (this done) to appropriate that word exclusively to one meaning, and the synonym—should there be one—to the other. But if (as will be often the case

²¹ "Whatever it may be worth."

in the arts and sciences) no synonym exists, we must either invent or borrow a word. In the present instance the appropriation has already begun, and been legitimated in the derivative adjective: Milton had a highly *imaginative*, Cowley a very *fanciful* mind. If, therefore, I should succeed in establishing the actual existence of two faculties generally different, the nomenclature would be at once determined. To the faculty by which I had characterized Milton, we should confine the term *imagination*; while the other would be contra-distinguished as *fancy*. Now were it once fully ascertained that this division is no less grounded in nature than that of delirium from mania, or Otway's

Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and ships of amber,

from Shakespeare's

What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?¹

or from the preceding apostrophe to the elements,—the theory of the fine arts, and of poetry in particular, could not, I thought, but derive some additional and important light. It would in its immediate effects furnish a torch of guidance to the philosophical critic, and ultimately to the poet himself. In energetic minds, truth soon changes by domestication into power, and, from directing in the discrimination and appraisal of the product, becomes influence in the production. To admire on principle is the only way to imitate without loss of originality.

It has been already hinted that metaphysics and psychology have long been my hobby-horse. But to have a hobby-horse, and to be vain of it, are so commonly found together that they pass almost for the same. I trust, therefore, that there will be more good humor than contempt in the smile with which the reader chastises my self-complacency, if I confess myself uncertain whether the satisfaction from the perception of a truth new to myself

¹ From a speech of the mad Belvidera, in Otway's *Venice Preserved*, V, ii (where the original, however, reads "laurels" in place of "lobsters"); and from *King Lear*, III, iv, 65.

may not have been rendered more poignant by the conceit that it would be equally so to the public. There was a time, certainly, in which I took some little credit to myself in the belief that I had been the first of my countrymen who had pointed out the diverse meaning of which the two terms were capable, and analyzed the faculties to which they should be appropriated. Mr. W. Taylor's recent volume of Synonyms I have not yet seen; but his specification of the terms in question has been clearly shown to be both insufficient and erroneous by Mr. Wordsworth in the Preface added to the late collection of his *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*.² The explanation which Mr. Wordsworth has himself given will be found to differ from mine, chiefly, perhaps, as our objects are different. It could scarcely, indeed, happen otherwise, from the advantage I have enjoyed of frequent conversation with him on a subject to which a poem of his own first directed my attention, and my conclusions concerning which he had made more lucid to myself by many happy instances drawn from the operation of natural objects on the mind. But it was Mr. Wordsworth's purpose to consider the influences of fancy and imagination as they are manifested in poetry, and from the different effects to conclude their diversity in kind; while it is my object to investigate the seminal principle, and then from the kind to deduce the degree. My friend has drawn a masterly sketch of the branches with their poetic fruitage. I wish to add the trunk, and even the roots as far as they lift themselves above ground and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness. . . .

I shall now proceed to the nature and genesis of the imagination; but I must first take leave to notice that, after a more accurate perusal of Mr. Wordsworth's remarks on the imagination, in his Preface to the new edition of his poems, I find that my conclusions are not so consentient with his as, I confess, I had taken for granted. In an article contributed by me to Mr. Southey's *Omniana*,³ on the soul and its organs of sense, are the following sentences. "These [the human faculties] I would

² See page 35.

³ A miscellany published in 1812; Coleridge's essay is No. 174.

arrange under the different senses and powers: as the eye, the ear, the touch, etc.; the imitative power, voluntary and automatic; the imagination, or shaping and modifying power; the fancy, or the aggregative and associative power; the understanding, or the regulative, substantiating, and realizing power; the speculative reason, *vis theoretica et scientifica*, or the power by which we produce or aim to produce unity, necessity, and universality in all our knowledge by means of principles *a priori*; the will, or practical reason; the faculty of choice (*Germanice, Willkür*); and (distinct both from the moral will and the choice) the *sensation* of volition, which I have found reason to include under the head of single and double touch." To this, as far as it relates to the subject in question, namely the words "the aggregative and associative power," Mr. Wordsworth's "only objection is that the definition is too general. To aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the imagination as to the fancy." I reply that if, by the power of evoking and combining, Mr. Wordsworth means the same as, and no more than, I meant by the aggregative and associative, I continue to deny that it belongs at all to the imagination; and I am disposed to conjecture that he has mistaken the co-presence of fancy with imagination for the operation of the latter singly. A man may work with two very different tools at the same moment; each has its share in the work, but the work effected by each is distinct and different. But it will probably appear in the next chapter that, deeming it necessary to go back much further than Mr. Wordsworth's subject required or permitted, I have attached a meaning to both fancy and imagination which he had not in view, at least while he was writing that preface. He will judge. Would to heaven I might meet with many such readers! I will conclude with the words of Bishop Jeremy Taylor: He to whom all things are one, who draweth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may enjoy true peace and rest of spirit. (*Via Pacis*.)⁴ . . .

The imagination, then, I consider as either primary or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the

⁴ See *The Golden Grove* (1655), "Agenda," Sunday, Sec. 8.

living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree* and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space, while it is blended with, and modified by, that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word *choice*. But equally with the ordinary memory the fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

Whatever more than this I shall think it fit to declare concerning the powers and privileges of the imagination, in the present work, will be found in the critical essay on the uses of the supernatural in poetry, and the principles that regulate its introduction, which the reader will find prefixed to the poem of "The Ancient Mariner."⁵

THE "LYRICAL BALLADS" AND THE DEFINITION OF POETRY

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

[The 14th chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*.]

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbors,¹ our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty

⁵ This essay was never completed, much less published.

¹ 1797-98, when Coleridge resided at Nether Stowey and Wordsworth at Alfoxden.

by the modifying colors of imagination. The sudden charm which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

With this view I wrote "The Ancient Mariner," and was preparing, among other poems, "The Dark Ladie" and the "Christabel," in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal than I had done in my first attempt. But Mr. Wordsworth's industry had proved so much more

successful, and the number of his poems so much greater, that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter. Mr. Wordsworth added two or three poems written in his own character, in the impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction which is characteristic of his genius. In this form the *Lyrical Ballads* were published, and were presented by him as an *experiment* whether subjects which from their nature rejected the usual ornaments and extra-colloquial style of poems in general, might not be so managed in the language of ordinary life as to produce the pleasurable interest which it is the peculiar business of poetry to impart. To the second edition he added a preface of considerable length; in which, notwithstanding some passages of apparently a contrary import, he was understood to contend for the extension of this style to poetry of all kinds, and to reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of style that were not included in what he (unfortunately, I think, adopting an equivocal expression) called the language of *real* life. From this preface, prefixed to poems in which it was impossible to deny the presence of original genius, however mistaken its direction might be deemed, arose the whole long-continued controversy. For from the conjunction of perceived power with supposed heresy I explain the inveteracy and in some instances, I grieve to say, the acrimonious passions, with which the controversy has been conducted by the assailants.

Had Mr. Wordsworth's poems been the silly, the childish things, which they were for a long time described as being; had they been really distinguished from the compositions of other poets merely by meanness of language and inanity of thought; had they indeed contained nothing more than what is found in the parodies and pretended imitations of them; they must have sunk at once, a dead weight, into the slough of oblivion, and have dragged the preface along with them. But year after year increased the number of Mr. Wordsworth's admirers. They were found, too, not in the lower classes of the reading public, but chiefly among young men of strong sensibility and meditative minds, and their admiration (inflamed perhaps in some degree by opposition) was distinguished by its

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intensity, I might almost say by its religious fervor. These facts, and the intellectual energy of the author, which was more or less consciously felt, where it was outwardly and even boisterously denied, meeting with sentiments of aversion to his opinions and of alarm at their consequences, produced an eddy of criticism which would of itself have borne up the poems by the violence with which it whirled them round and round. With many parts of this preface, in the sense attributed to them and which the words undoubtedly seem to authorize, I never concurred; but on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same preface and to the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves. Mr. Wordsworth in his recent collection has, I find, degraded this prefatory disquisition to the end of his second volume, to be read or not at the reader's choice. But he has not, as far as I can discover, announced any change in his poetic creed. At all events, considering it as the source of a controversy in which I have been honored more than I deserve by the frequent conjunction of my name with his, I think it expedient to declare once for all in what points I coincide with his opinions, and in what points I altogether differ. But in order to render myself intelligible I must previously, in as few words as possible, explain my ideas, first, of a Poem, and secondly, of Poetry itself, in kind and in essence.

The office of philosophical disquisition consists in just distinction, while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts, and this is the technical *process* of philosophy. But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity in which they actually coëxist, and this is the *result* of philosophy. A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed. According to the difference of the object will be the difference of the combination. It is possible that the object

may be merely to facilitate the recollection of any given facts or observations by artificial arrangement, and the composition will be a poem merely because it is distinguished from prose by meter, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly. In this, the lowest sense, a man might attribute the name of a poem to the well-known enumeration of the days in the several months:—

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November; etc.,

and others of the same class and purpose. And as a particular pleasure is found in anticipating the recurrence of sounds and quantities, all compositions that have this charm super-added, whatever be their contents, *may* be entitled poems.

So much for the superficial form. A difference of object and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction. The immediate purpose may be the communication of truths,—either of truth absolute and demonstrable, as in works of science, or of facts experienced and recorded, as in history. Pleasure, and that of the highest and most permanent kind, may result from the attainment of the end, but it is not itself the immediate end. In other works the communication of pleasure may be the immediate purpose; and though truth, either moral or intellectual, ought to be the ultimate end, yet this will distinguish the character of the author, not the class to which the work belongs. Blest indeed is that state of society in which the immediate purpose would be baffled by the perversion of the proper ultimate end; in which no charm of diction or imagery could exempt the “Bathyllus” even of an Anacreon, or the “Alexis” of Virgil, from disgust and aversion!

But the communication of pleasure may be the immediate object of a work not metrically composed; and that object may have been in a high degree attained, as in novels and romances. Would, then, the mere superaddition of meter, with or without rhyme, entitle these to the name of poems? The answer is, that nothing can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise. If meter be super-

added, all other parts must be made consonant with it. They must be such as to justify the perpetual and distinct attention to each part, which an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound are calculated to excite. The final definition, then, so deduced, may be thus worded. A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science,² by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth, and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole* as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.

Controversy is not seldom excited in consequence of the disputants attaching each a different meaning to the same word; and in few instances has this been more striking than in disputes concerning the present subject. If a man chooses to call every composition a poem which is rhyme, or measure, or both, I must leave his opinion uncontroverted. The distinction is at least competent to characterize the writer's intention. If it were subjoined that the whole is likewise entertaining or affecting, as a tale or as a series of interesting reflections, I of course admit this as another fit ingredient of a poem, and an additional merit. But if the definition sought for be that of a *legitimate* poem, I answer, it must be one the parts of which mutually support and explain each other, all in their proportion harmonizing with and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement. The philosophic critics of all ages coincide with the ultimate judgment of all countries, in equally denying the praises of a just poem, on the one hand, to a series of striking lines or distiches each of which, absorbing the whole attention of the reader to itself, disjoins it from its context, and makes it a separate whole instead of a harmonizing part, and on the other hand, to an unsustained composition from which the reader collects rapidly the general result, unattracted by the component parts. The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the

² Compare Wordsworth, p. 9, note 6.

pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power, or like the path of sound through the air, at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. "Præcipitandus est liber spiritus,"³ says Petronius Arbiter most happily. The epithet *liber* here balances the preceding verb; and it is not easy to conceive more meaning condensed in fewer words.

But if this should be admitted as a satisfactory character of a poem, we have still to seek for a definition of poetry. The writings of Plato, and Bishop Taylor, and the *Theoria Sacra* of Burnet,⁴ furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without meter, and even without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem. The first chapter of *Isaiah* (indeed a very large portion of the whole book) is poetry in the most emphatic sense; yet it would be not less irrational than strange to assert that pleasure, and not truth, was the immediate object of the prophet. In short, whatever specific import we attach to the word poetry, there will be found involved in it, as a necessary consequence, that a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry. Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved *in keeping* with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise effected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement as will partake of one, though not a peculiar, property of poetry. And this again can be no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written.

My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination. What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, What is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and

³ From the *Satyricon*, 118. "The free spirit is to be vehemently urged forward."

⁴ Published in Latin, 1681; in English, 1684.

modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) *fuses* each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis*),⁵ reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgment ever awake, and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature, the manner to the matter, and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. "Doubtless," as Sir John Davies observes of the soul (and his words may with slight alteration be applied, and even more appropriately, to the poetic imagination),—

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,
As fire converts to fire the things it burns,
As we our food into our nature change.

From their gross matter she abstracts their forms,
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;
Which to her proper nature she transforms,
To bear them light on her celestial wings.

Thus does she, when from individual states
She doth abstract the universal kinds;
Which then, recloth'd in divers names and fates,
Steal access through our senses to our minds.⁶

⁵ "Is borne along with loosened reins."

⁶ Quoted, with some alterations, from Davies' poem, "On the Soul of Man and the Immortality Thereof."

Finally, good sense is the body of poetic genius, fancy its drapery, motion its life, and imagination the soul that is everywhere, and in each, and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

WORDSWORTH'S THEORY OF POETIC DICTION

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

[From chapters 17 and 18 of the *Biographia Literaria*.]

As far then as Mr. Wordsworth in his Préface contended, and most ably contended, for a reformation in our poetic diction; as far as he has evinced the truth of passion, and the *dramatic* propriety of those figures and metaphors in the original poets, which, stripped of their justifying reasons, and converted into mere artifices of connection or ornament, constitute the characteristic falsity in the poetic style of the moderns; and as far as he has, with equal acuteness and clearness, pointed out the process by which this change was effected, and the resemblances between that state into which the reader's mind is thrown by the pleasurable confusion of thought from an unaccustomed train of words and images, and that state which is induced by the natural language of impassioned feeling,—he undertook a useful task, and deserves all praise both for the attempt and for the execution. The provocations to this remonstrance in behalf of truth and nature were still of perpetual recurrence before and after the publication of this preface. I cannot likewise but add that the comparison of such poems of merit as have been given to the public within the last ten or twelve years, with the majority of those produced previously to the appearance of that preface, leave no doubt on my mind that Mr. Wordsworth is fully justified in believing his efforts to have been by no means ineffectual. Not only in the verses of those who have professed their admiration of his genius, but even of those who have distinguished themselves by hostility to his theory, and depreciation of his writings, are the impressions of his principles plainly visible. It is possible that with these

principles others may have been blended, which are not equally evident, and some which are unsteady and subvertible from the narrowness or imperfection of their basis. But it is more than possible that these errors of defect or exaggeration, by kindling and feeding the controversy, may have conduced not only to the wider propagation of the accompanying truths, but that, by their frequent presentation to the mind in an excited state, they may have won for them a more permanent and practical result. A man will borrow a part from his opponent the more easily, if he feels himself justified in continuing to reject a part. While there remain important points in which he can still feel himself in the right, in which he still finds firm footing for continued resistance, he will gradually adopt those opinions which were the least remote from his own convictions, as not less congruous with his own theory than with that which he reprobates. In like manner, with a kind of instinctive prudence, he will abandon by little and little his weakest posts, till at length he seems to forget that they had ever belonged to him, or affects to consider them at most as accidental and "petty annexments," the removal of which leaves the citadel unhurt and unendangered.

My own differences from certain supposed parts of Mr. Wordsworth's theory ground themselves on the assumption that his words had been rightly interpreted as purporting that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life,—a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings. My objection is, first, that in any sense this rule is applicable only to certain classes of poetry; secondly, that even to these classes it is not applicable except in such a sense as hath never by any one (as far as I know or have read) been denied or doubted; and lastly, that as far as, and in that degree in which, it is practicable, yet as a rule it is useless, if not injurious, and therefore either need not or ought not to be practiced. The poet informs his reader that he had generally chosen *low and rustic* life, but not *as low and rustic*, or in order to repeat that pleasure, of doubtful moral effect, which persons of elevated rank and

of superior refinement oftentimes derive from a happy imitation of the rude unpolished manners and discourse of their inferiors. For the pleasure so derived may be traced to three exciting causes. The first is the naturalness, in fact, of the things represented. The second is the apparent naturalness of the representation, as raised and qualified by an imperceptible infusion of the author's own knowledge and talent, which infusion does indeed constitute it an *imitation* as distinguished from a mere *copy*. The third cause may be found in the reader's conscious feeling of his superiority awakened by the contrast presented to him, even as for the same purpose the kings and great barons of yore retained sometimes actual clowns and fools, but more frequently shrewd and witty fellows in that character. These, however, were not Mr. Wordsworth's objects. He chose low and rustic life, "because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil, in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coëxist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."¹

Now it is clear to me that, in the most interesting of the poems, in which the author is more or less dramatic, as "The Brothers," "Michael," "Ruth," "The Mad Mother," etc., the persons introduced are by no means taken from low or rustic life in the common acceptation of those words; and it is not less clear that the sentiments and language, as far as they can be conceived to have been really transferred from the minds and conversation of such persons, are attributable to causes and circumstances not necessarily connected with "their occupations and abode." The thoughts, feelings, language,

¹ See page 3.

and manners of the shepherd-farmers in the vales of Cumberland and Westmoreland, as far as they are actually adopted in those poems, may be accounted for from causes which will and do produce the same results in every state of life, whether in town or country. As the two principal I rank that *independence*, which raises a man above servitude, or daily toil for the profit of others, yet not above the necessity of industry and a frugal simplicity of domestic life, and the accompanying unambitious but solid and religious *education*, which has rendered few books familiar but the Bible and the liturgy or hymn-book. To this latter cause, indeed, which is so far accidental that it is the blessing of particular countries and a particular age, not the product of particular places or employments, the poet owes the show of probability that his personages might really feel, think, and talk with any tolerable resemblance to his representation. It is an excellent remark of Dr. Henry More's, that "a man of confined education, but of good parts, by constant reading of the Bible will naturally form a more winning and commanding rhetoric than those that are learned, the intermixture of tongues and of artificial phrases debasing *their style*." (*Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*,² Sec. xxxv.)

It is, moreover, to be considered that to the formation of healthy feelings, and a reflecting mind, *negations* involve impediments not less formidable than sophistication and vicious intermixture. I am convinced that for the human soul to prosper in rustic life a certain vantage-ground is prerequisite. It is not every man that is likely to be improved by a country life or by country labors. Education, or original sensibility, or both, must pre-exist, if the changes, forms, and incidents of nature are to prove a sufficient stimulant. And where these are not sufficient, the mind contracts and hardens by want of stimulants, and the man becomes selfish, sensual, gross, and hard-hearted. Let the management of the Poor Laws in Liverpool, Manchester, or Bristol be compared with the ordinary dispensation of the poor rates in agricultural villages, where the farmers are the overseers and guardi-

² Published 1656.

ans of the poor. If my own experience has not been particularly unfortunate, as well as that of the many respectable country clergymen with whom I have conversed on the subject, the result would engender more than skepticism concerning the desirable influences of low and rustic life in and for itself. Whatever may be concluded on the other side, from the stronger local attachments and enterprising spirit of the Swiss and other mountaineers, applies to a particular mode of pastoral life, under forms of property that permit and beget manners truly republican, not to rustic life in general, or to the absence of artificial cultivation. On the contrary the mountaineers, whose manners have been so often eulogized, are in general better educated and greater readers than men of equal rank elsewhere. But where this is not the case, as among the peasantry of North Wales, the ancient mountains, with all their terrors and all their glories, are pictures to the blind and music to the deaf.

I should not have entered so much into detail upon this passage, but here seems to be the point to which all the lines of difference converge as to their source and center. (I mean, as far as, and in whatever respect, my poetic creed does differ from the doctrines promulgated in this Preface.) I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle, that poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*, that it avoids and excludes all accident;³ that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class; and that the persons of poetry must be clothed with generic attributes, with the common attributes of the class,—not with such as one gifted individual might *possibly* possess, but such as from his situation it is most probable beforehand that he *would* possess. If my premises are right and my deductions legitimate, it follows that there can be no *poetic* medium between the swains of Theocritus and those of an imaginary golden age.

The characters of the vicar and the shepherd-mariner in the poem of "The Brothers," that of the shepherd of

³ See the note from the *Poetics* on p. 13. In the same connection Aristotle says: "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity." (Butcher translation.)

Greenhead Ghyll in the "Michael," have all the verisimilitude and representative quality that the purposes of poetry can require. They are persons of a known and abiding class, and their manners and sentiments the natural product of circumstances common to the class.⁴ . . . On the other hand, in the poems which are pitched at a lower note, as the "Harry Gill," "Idiot Boy," the feelings are those of human nature in general, though the poet has judiciously laid the scene in the country, in order to place himself in the vicinity of interesting images, without the necessity of ascribing a sentimental perception of their beauty to the persons of his drama. In the "Idiot Boy," indeed, the mother's character is not so much a real and native product of a "situation where the essential passions of the heart find a better soil, in which they can attain their maturity and speak a plainer and more emphatic language," as it is an impersonation of an instinct abandoned by judgment. Hence the two following charges seem to me not wholly groundless: at least they are the only plausible objections which I have heard to that fine poem. The one is, that the author has not in the poem itself taken sufficient care to preclude from the reader's fancy the disgusting images of ordinary morbid idiocy, which yet it was by no means his intention to represent. He has even by the "burr, burr, burr," uncounteracted by any preceding description of the boy's beauty, assisted in recalling them. The other is, that the idiocy of the boy is so evenly balanced by the folly of the mother as to present to the general reader rather a laughable burlesque on the blindness of anile dotage, than an analytic display of maternal affection in its ordinary workings.

In "The Thorn" the poet himself acknowledges in a note the necessity of an introductory poem, in which he should have portrayed the character of the person from whom the words of the poem are supposed to proceed: a superstitious man, moderately imaginative, of slow faculties and deep feelings, "a captain of a small trading vessel, for example, who, being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity, or small independent

⁴ The omitted passage is an extended quotation from "Michael."

income, to some village or country town of which he was not a native, or in which he had not been accustomed to live. Such men, having nothing to do, become credulous and talkative from indolence." But in a poem, still more in a lyric poem (and the Nurse in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* alone prevents me from extending the remark even to dramatic *poetry*, if indeed the Nurse itself can be deemed altogether a case in point), it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity. However this may be, I dare assert that the parts (and these form the far larger portion of the whole) which might as well or still better have proceeded from the poet's own imagination, and have been spoken in his own character, are those which have given, and which will continue to give, universal delight; and that the passages exclusively appropriate to the supposed narrator, such as the last couplet of the third stanza,⁵ the seven last lines of the tenth,⁶ and the five following stanzas, with the exception of the four admirable lines at the commencement of the fourteenth, are felt by many unprejudiced and unsophisticated hearts as sudden and unpleasant sinkings from the height to which the poet had previously lifted them, and to which he again re-elevates both himself and his reader.

If, then, I am compelled to doubt the theory by which the choice of characters was to be directed, not only *a priori*, from grounds of reason, but both from the few instances in which the poet himself need be supposed to have been governed by it, and from the comparative inferiority of those instances; still more must I hesitate in my assent to the sentence which immediately follows the former citation, and which I can neither admit as

⁵ I've measured it from side to side;
 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide.
 This couplet was revised by Wordsworth to read:
 Though but of compass small, and bare
 To thirsty suns and parching air.

⁶ Nay, rack your brain—'tis all in vain,
 I'll tell you everything I know;
 But to the Thorn, and to the pond
 Which is a little step beyond,
 I wish that you would go;
 Perhaps when you are at the place,
 You something of her tale may trace.

particular fact or as general rule. "The language too of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust), because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions." To this I reply that a rustic's language, purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far reconstructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar (which are in essence no other than the laws of universal logic, applied to psychological materials), will not differ from the language of any other man of common sense, however learned or refined he may be, except as far as the notions which the rustic has to convey are fewer and more indiscriminate. This will become still clearer if we add the consideration (equally important though less obvious) that the rustic, from the more imperfect development of his faculties, and from the lower state of their cultivation, aims almost solely to convey insulated facts, either those of his scanty experience or his traditional belief; while the educated man chiefly seeks to discover and express those connections of things, or those relative bearings of fact to fact, from which some more or less general law is deducible. For facts are valuable to a wise man chiefly as they lead to the discovery of the indwelling law which is the true being of things, the sole solution of their modes of existence, and in the knowledge of which consists our dignity and our power.

As little can I agree with the assertion that from the objects with which the rustic hourly communicates the best part of language is formed. For first, if to communicate with an object implies such an acquaintance with it as renders it capable of being discriminately reflected on, the distinct knowledge of an uneducated rustic would furnish a very scanty vocabulary. The few things, and modes of action, requisite for his bodily conveniences, would alone be individualized, while all the rest of nature would be expressed by a small number of confused gen-

eral terms. Secondly, I deny that the words and combinations of words derived from the objects with which the rustic is familiar, whether with distinct or confused knowledge, can be justly said to form the *best* part of language. It is more than probable that many classes of the brute creation possess discriminating sounds, by which they can convey to each other notices of such objects as concern their food, shelter, or safety. Yet we hesitate to call the aggregate of such sounds a language, otherwise than metaphorically. The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man, though in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed nor reaped. If the history of the phrases in hourly currency among our peasants were traced, a person not previously aware of the fact would be surprised at finding so large a number which three or four centuries ago were the exclusive property of the universities and the schools, and at the commencement of the Reformation had been transferred from the school to the pulpit, and thus gradually passed into common life. The extreme difficulty, and often the impossibility, of finding words for the simplest moral and intellectual processes of the languages of uncivilized tribes has proved perhaps the weightiest obstacle to the progress of our most zealous and adroit missionaries. Yet these tribes are surrounded by the same nature as our peasants are, but in still more impressive forms, and they are, moreover, obliged to particularize many more of them. When, therefore, Mr. Wordsworth adds, "accordingly, such a language" (meaning, as before, the language of rustic life purified from provincialism), "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art in proportion as they indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits

of expression,"—it may be answered that the language which he has in view can be attributed to rustics with no greater right than the style of Hooker or Bacon to Tom Brown or Sir Roger L'Estrange.⁷ Doubtless, if what is peculiar to each were omitted in each, the result must needs be the same. Further, that the poet who uses an illogical diction, or a style fitted to excite only the low and changeable pleasure of wonder by means of groundless novelty, substitutes a language of folly and vanity, not for that of the rustic, but for that of good sense and natural feeling.

Here let me be permitted to remind the reader that the positions which I controvert are contained in the sentences: "a selection of the *real* language of men"; "the language of these men" (i.e. men in low and rustic life) "I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men." "Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is nor can be any essential difference." It is against these exclusively that my opposition is directed.

I object, in the very first instance, to an equivocation in the use of the word "real." Every man's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man's language has, first, its individualities; secondly, the common properties of the class to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of universal use. The language of Hooker, Bacon, Bishop Taylor, and Burke differs from the common language of the learned class only by the superior number and novelty of the thoughts and relations which they had to convey. The language of Algernon Sidney⁸ differs not at all from that which every well-educated gentleman would wish to write, and (with due allowances for the undeliberateness, and less connected train of thinking natural and proper to conversation) such as he would wish to talk. Neither one nor the other differ half so much from the general language of cultivated society as the language of Mr. Wordsworth's homeliest composition differs from that of a common peasant. For "real," therefore, we must sub-

⁷ Brown and L'Estrange were pamphleteers; both died in 1704.

⁸ Author of *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698).

stitute *ordinary*, or *lingua communis*. And this, we have proved, is no more to be found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in that of any other class. Omit the peculiarities of each, and the result of course must be common to all. And assuredly the omissions and changes to be made in the language of rustics, before it could be transferred to any species of poem (except the drama or other professed imitation), are at least as numerous and weighty as would be required in adapting to the same purpose the ordinary language of tradesmen and manufacturers. Not to mention, that the language so highly extolled by Mr. Wordsworth varies in every county, nay in every village, according to the accidental character of the clergyman, the existence or non-existence of schools, or even, perhaps, as the exciseman, publican, or barber happen to be, or not to be, zealous politicians and readers of the weekly newspaper *pro bono publico*. Anterior to cultivation, the *lingua communis* of every country, as Dante has well observed, exists everywhere in parts, and nowhere as a whole.⁹

Neither is the case rendered at all more tenable by the words "in a state of excitement." For the nature of a man's words, where he is strongly affected by joy, grief, or anger, must necessarily depend on the number and quality of the general truths, conceptions, and images, and of the words expressing them, with which his mind had been previously stored. For the property of passion is not to create, but to set in increased activity. At least, whatever new connections of thoughts or images, or (which is equally, if not more than equally, the appropriate effect of strong excitement) whatever generalizations of truth or experience, the heat of passion may produce, yet the terms of their conveyance must have pre-existed in his former conversations, and are only collected and crowded together by the unusual stimulation. It is indeed very possible to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters, which an unfurnished or confused understanding inter-

⁹ Coleridge seems to refer to a passage in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, i, 16, where Dante says that the standard vulgar tongue may be traced in every district but resides in none ("in quolibet redolet civitate, nec cubat in ulla").

poses at short intervals, in order to keep hold of his subject, which is still slipping from him, and to give him time for recollection, or in mere aid of vacancy, as in the scanty companies of a country stage the same player pops backwards and forwards, in order to prevent the appearance of empty spaces, in the procession of *Macbeth* or *Henry VIII*. But what assistance to the poet, or ornament to the poem, these can supply, I am at a loss to conjecture. Nothing assuredly can differ in origin or in mode more widely from the apparent tautologies of intense and turbulent feeling, in which the passion is greater and of longer endurance than to be exhausted or satisfied by a single representation of the image or incident exciting it. Such repetitions I admit to be a beauty of the highest kind, as illustrated by Mr. Wordsworth himself from the song of Deborah: "At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down; at her feet he bowed, he fell; where he bowed, there he fell down dead."¹⁰

I conclude, therefore, that the attempt is impracticable, and that, were it not impracticable, it would still be useless. For the very power of making the selection implies the previous possession of the language selected. Or where can the poet have lived? And by what rules could he direct his choice, which would not have enabled him to select and arrange his words by the light of his own judgment? We do not adopt the language of a class by the mere adoption of such words exclusively as that class would use, or at least understand, but likewise by following the order in which the words of such men are wont to succeed each other. Now this order, in the intercourse of uneducated men, is distinguished from the diction of their superiors in knowledge and power, by the greater disjunction and separation in the component parts of that—whatever it be—which they wish to communicate. There is a want of that prospectiveness of mind, that *surview*, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey, appertaining to any one point, and by this means so to subordinate and arrange the different parts according to their relative importance, as to convey it at once, and as an organized whole.

¹⁰ *Judges* 5:27.

Now I will take the first stanza, on which I have chanced to open, in the *Lyrical Ballads*. It is one of the most simple and the least peculiar in its language.

In distant countries have I been,
And yet I have not often seen
A healthy man, a man full grown,
Weep in the public roads alone.
But such a one, on English ground,
And in the broad highway, I met;
Along the broad highway he came,
His cheeks with tears were wet:
Sturdy he seem'd, though he was sad;
And in his arms a lamb he had.¹¹

The words here are doubtless such as are current in all ranks of life, and of course not less so in the hamlet and cottage than in the shop, manufactory, college, or palace. But is this the *order* in which the rustic would have placed the words? I am grievously deceived if the following less compact mode of commencing the same tale be not a far more faithful copy. "I have been in many parts, far and near, and I don't know that I ever saw before a man crying by himself in the public road, a grown man, I mean, that was neither sick nor hurt," etc., etc. But when I turn to the following stanza in "The Thorn,"—

At all times of the day and night
This wretched woman thither goes,
And she is known to every star,
And every wind that blows:
And there, beside the thorn, she sits,
When the blue daylight's in the skies,
And when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still;
And to herself she cries,
"Oh misery! Oh misery!
Oh woe is me! Oh misery!"

and compare this with the language of ordinary men, or with that which I can conceive at all likely to proceed, in real life, from such a narrator as is supposed in the note to the poem,—compare it either in the succession of

¹¹ From "The Last of the Flock."

the images or of the sentences,—I am reminded of the sublime prayer and hymn of praise which Milton, in opposition to an established liturgy, presents as a fair specimen of common extemporary devotion, and such as we might expect to hear from every self-inspired minister of a conventicle!¹² And I reflect with delight how little a mere theory, though of his own workmanship, interferes with the processes of genuine imagination in a man of true poetic genius, who possesses, as Mr. Wordsworth, if ever man did, most assuredly does possess, "the vision and the faculty divine."

One point then alone remains, but that the most important; its examination having been, indeed, my chief inducement for the preceding inquisition. "There neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." Such is Mr. Wordsworth's assertion. Now prose itself, at least in all argumentative and consecutive works, differs, and ought to differ, from the language of conversation; even as reading ought to differ from talking.¹³ Unless, therefore, the difference denied be that of the mere words, as materials common to all styles of writing, and not of the style itself in the universally admitted sense of the term, it might be naturally presumed that there must exist a still greater between the ordonnance of poetic composition and that of prose, than is expected to distinguish prose from ordinary conversation.¹⁴

¹² The reference is uncertain; Coleridge may have had in mind the prayer which Milton introduced into the fourth section of his *Animadversions upon the Remonstrant's Defense against Smectymnus*, the second section having contained a defence of non-liturgical worship.

¹³ It is no less an error in teachers than a torment to the poor children, to inforce the necessity of reading as they would talk. In order to cure them of *singing*, as it is called, that is, of too great a difference, the child is made to repeat the words with his eyes from off the book; and then, indeed, his tones resemble talking, as far as his fears, tears, and trembling will permit. But as soon as his eye is again directed to the printed page, the spell begins anew; for an instinctive sense tells the child's feelings that to utter its own momentary thoughts, and to recite the written thoughts of another, a far wiser than himself, are two widely different things; and as the two acts are accompanied with widely different feelings, so must they justify different modes of enunciation. [Coleridge's note.]

¹⁴ In the omitted passage Coleridge elaborately discusses the term "*essentially* different."

The question is not, whether there may not occur in prose an order of words which would be equally proper in a poem, nor whether there are not beautiful lines and sentences of frequent occurrence in good poems, which would be equally becoming as well as beautiful in good prose; for neither the one nor the other has ever been either denied or doubted by any one. The true question must be, whether there are not modes of expression, a construction, and an order of sentences, which are in their fit and natural place in a serious prose composition, but would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry; and, *vice versa*, whether in the language of a serious poem there may not be an arrangement both of words and sentences, and a use and selection of (what are called) figures of speech, both as to their kind, their frequency, and their occasions, which on a subject of equal weight would be vicious and alien in correct and manly prose. I contend that in both cases this unfitness of each for the place of the other frequently will and ought to exist.

And first from the *origin* of meter. This I would trace to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion. It might be easily explained likewise in what manner this salutary antagonism is assisted by the very state which it counteracts; and how this balance of antagonists became organized into meter (in the usual acceptation of that term) by a supervening act of the will and judgment, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure. Assuming these principles, as the data of our argument, we deduce from them two legitimate conditions, which the critic is entitled to expect in every metrical work. First, that, as the elements of meter owe their existence to a state of increased excitement, so the meter itself should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement. Secondly, that as these elements are formed into meter artificially, by a voluntary act, with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emotion, so the traces of present volition should throughout the metrical language be proportionately discernible. Now these two conditions must be reconciled and co-present. There must be not only a partnership, but a union; an

interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose. Again, this union can be manifested only in a frequency of forms and figures of speech (originally the offspring of passion, but now the adopted children of power) greater than would be desired or endured, where the emotion is not voluntarily encouraged and kept up for the sake of that pleasure which such emotion, so tempered and mastered by the will, is found capable of communicating. It not only dictates, but of itself tends to produce, a more frequent employment of picturesque and vivifying language than would be natural in any other case, in which there did not exist, as there does in the present, a previous and well understood, though tacit, compact between the poet and his reader, that the latter is entitled to expect, and the former bound to supply, this species and degree of pleasurable excitement. We may in some measure apply to this union the answer of Polixenes, in the *Winter's Tale*,¹⁵ to Perdita's neglect of the streaked gilly-flowers, because she had heard it said,

There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating Nature.

Pol. Say there be;

Yet Nature is made better by no mean,
But Nature makes that mean; so, even that art
Which you say adds to Nature is an art
That Nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of ruder kind
By bud of nobler race. This is an art
Which does mend Nature—change it rather; but
The art itself is Nature.

Secondly, I argue from the *effects* of meter. As far as meter acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their

¹⁵ IV, iv, 87-97.

aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed. Where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt, like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a staircase, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four.

The discussion on the powers of meter in the Preface is highly ingenious, and touches at all points on truth. But I cannot find any statement of its powers considered abstractly and separately. On the contrary, Mr. Wordsworth seems always to estimate meter by the powers which it exerts during (and, as I think, in consequence of) its combination with other elements of poetry. Thus the previous difficulty is left unanswered, *what* the elements are with which it must be combined in order to produce its own effects to any pleasurable purpose. Double and tri-syllable rhymes, indeed, form a lower species of wit, and, attended to exclusively for their own sake, may become a source of momentary amusement,—as in poor Smart's¹⁶ distich to the Welsh squire who had promised him a hare:

Tell me, thou son of great Cadwallader!
Hast sent the hare? or hast thou swallow'd her?

But for any poetic purposes, meter resembles (if the aptness of the simile may excuse its meanness) yeast, worthless or disagreeable by itself, but giving vivacity and spirit to the liquor with which it is proportionately combined.

The reference to the "Children in the Wood"¹⁷ by no means satisfies my judgment. We all willingly throw ourselves back for awhile into the feelings of our childhood. This ballad, therefore, we read under such recollections of our own childish feelings as would equally endear to us poems which Mr. Wordsworth himself would

¹⁶ Christopher Smart (1722-1771), a poet who was for a time insane.

¹⁷ See p. 23.

regard as faulty in the opposite extreme of gaudy and technical ornament. Before the invention of printing, and in a still greater degree before the introduction of writing, meter, especially alliterative meter (whether alliterative at the beginning of the words, as in *Piers Plowman*, or at the end as in rhymes), possessed an independent value as assisting the recollection, and consequently the preservation, of *any* series of truths or incidents. But I am not convinced by the collation of facts, that the "Children in the Wood" owes either its preservation or its popularity to its metrical form. Mr. Marshall's repository affords a number of tales in prose inferior in pathos and general merit, some of as old a date, and many as widely popular. *Tom Hickathrift*, *Jack the Giant-Killer*, *Goody Two-Shoes*, and *Little Red Riding-Hood* are formidable rivals. And that they have continued in prose cannot be fairly explained by the assumption that the comparative meanness of their thoughts and images precluded even the humblest forms of meter. The scene of *Goody Two-Shoes* in the church is perfectly susceptible of metrical narration; and among the *θαύματα θαυμαστότερα*¹⁸ even of the present age I do not recollect a more astonishing image than that of the "whole rookery that flew out of the giant's beard," scared by the tremendous voice with which this monster answered the challenge of the heroic Tom Hickathrift!

If from these we turn to compositions universally—and independently of all early associations—beloved and admired would the *Maria*, the *Monk*, or the *Poor Man's Ass* of Sterne¹⁹ be read with more delight, or have a better chance of immortality, had they without any change in the diction been composed in rhyme, than in their present state? If I am not grossly mistaken, the general reply would be in the negative. Nay, I will confess that, in Mr. Wordsworth's own volumes, the "Anecdote for Fathers," "Simon Lee," "Alice Fell," "The Beggars," and "The Sailor's Mother," notwithstanding the beauties which are to be found in each of them where the poet interposes the music of his own thoughts, would have been more delightful to me in prose, told and managed,

¹⁸ "Most wonderful wonders."

¹⁹ Sketches in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768).

as by Mr. Wordsworth they would have been, in a moral essay or pedestrian tour.

Meter in itself is simply a stimulant of the attention, and therefore excites the question: Why is the attention to be stimulated? Now the question cannot be answered by the pleasure of the meter itself; for this we have shown to be conditional, and dependent on the appropriateness of the thoughts and expressions to which the metrical form is superadded. Neither can I conceive any other answer that can be rationally given, short of this: I write in meter, because I am about to use a language different from that of prose. Besides, where the language is not such, how interesting soever the reflections are that are capable of being drawn by a philosophic mind from the thoughts or incidents of the poem, the meter itself must often become feeble. Take the last three stanzas of "The Sailor's Mother," for instance. If I could for a moment abstract from the effect produced on the author's feelings, as a man, by the incident at the time of its real occurrence, I would dare appeal to his own judgment whether in the meter itself he found a sufficient reason for their being written metrically.

And, thus continuing, she said:
I had a son, who many a day
Sailed on the seas; but he is dead;
In Denmark he was cast away:
And I have traveled far as Hull, to see
What clothes he might have left, or other property.

The bird and cage they both were his:
'Twas my son's bird; and neat and trim
He kept it: many voyages
The singing-bird hath gone with him;
When last he sailed he left the bird behind,
As it might be, perhaps, from bodings of his mind.

He to a fellow-lodger's care
Had left it, to be watched and fed,
Till he came back again; and there
I found it when my son was dead;
And now, God help me for my little wit!
I trail it with me, sir! he took so much delight in it.

If, disproportioning the emphasis, we read these stanzas so as to make the rhymes perceptible, even tri-syllable rhymes could scarcely produce an equal sense of oddity and strangeness as we feel here in finding *rhymes at all* in sentences so exclusively colloquial. I would further ask whether, but for that visionary state into which the figure of the woman and the susceptibility of his own genius had placed the poet's imagination (a state which spreads its influence and coloring over all that exists with the exciting cause, and in which

The simplest and the most familiar things
Gain a strange power of spreading awe around them,) ²⁰

—I would ask the poet whether he would not have felt an abrupt downfall in these verses from the preceding stanza:

The ancient spirit is not dead;
Old times, thought I, are breathing there;
Proud was I that my country bred
Such strength, a dignity so fair;
She begged an alms, like one in poor estate;
I looked at her again, nor did my pride abate.

It must not be omitted, and is besides worthy of notice, that those stanzas furnish the only fair instance that I have been able to discover in all Mr. Wordsworth's writings of an actual adoption, or true imitation, of the real and very language of low and rustic life, freed from provincialisms.

Thirdly, I deduce the position from all the causes elsewhere assigned which render meter the proper form of poetry, and poetry imperfect and defective without meter. Meter, therefore, having been connected with poetry most often and by a peculiar fitness, whatever else is combined with meter must, though it be not itself essentially poetic, have nevertheless some property in common with poetry, is an intermedium of affinity, a sort (if I may dare borrow a well-worn phrase from technical chemistry) of *nordant* between it and the super-added meter. Now poetry, Mr. Wordsworth truly affirms, does always imply

²⁰ Altered from the description of Night-Mair in the *Remorse*. Coleridge's note.]

passion; which word must be here understood in its general sense, as an excited state of the feelings and faculties. And as every passion has its proper pulse, so will it likewise have its characteristic modes of expression. But where there exists that degree of genius and talent which entitles a writer to aim at the honors of a poet, the very act of poetic composition itself is, and is allowed to imply and produce, an unusual state of excitement, which of course justifies and demands a correspondent difference of language, as truly, though not perhaps in as marked a degree, as the excitement of love, fear, rage, or jealousy. The vividness of the descriptions or declamations in Donne or Dryden is as much and as often derived from the force and fervor of the describer, as from the reflections, forms, or incidents which constitute their subject and materials. The wheels take fire from the mere rapidity of their motion. To what extent, and under what modifications, this may be admitted to act, I shall attempt to define in an after remark on Mr. Wordsworth's reply to this objection, or rather on his objection to this reply, as already anticipated in his preface.

Fourthly, and as intimately connected with this, if not the same argument in a more general form, I adduce the high spiritual instinct of the human being impelling us to seek unity by harmonious adjustment, and thus establishing the principle that *all* the parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more important and essential parts. This and the preceding arguments may be strengthened by the reflection that the composition of a poem is among the imitative arts, and that imitation, as opposed to copying, consists either in the interfusion of the same throughout the radically different, or of the different throughout a base radically the same.

Lastly, I appeal to the practice of the best poets, of all countries and in all ages, as authorizing the opinion (deduced from all the foregoing) that, in every import of the word *essential* which would not here involve a mere truism, there may be, is, and ought to be an essential difference between the language of prose and of metrical composition. . . .

SHAKESPEARE

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

[Coleridge gave courses of lectures on Shakespeare and other poets in 1808, 1810-13, and 1818, for which he accumulated manuscript notes which were published in his *Literary Remains*, 1837-39. The notes represented in the following selections appear to be associated with the lectures of 1818. The German critic Schlegel had published his famous lectures on Dramatic Art in 1809, and many passages in these were observed to be strikingly like passages in the later lectures of Coleridge; the latter admitted the resemblance, but maintained that the same ideas had been set forth in his early lectures, before he could have seen Schlegel's. His son and editor wrote: "I think that my father . . . could hardly have been aware how many of the German critic's sentences he had repeated in these later lectures, how many of his illustrations had intertwined themselves with his own thoughts, . . . by the time they were to be delivered in 1818." See the foot-notes for the more important of the Schlegel parallels.]

SHAKESPEARE'S JUDGMENT EQUAL TO HIS GENIUS

Shakespeare appears, from his *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece* alone, apart from all his great works, to have possessed all the conditions of the true poet. Let me now proceed to destroy, as far as may be in my power, the popular notion that he was a great dramatist by mere instinct, that he grew immortal in his own despite, and sank below men of second- or third-rate power when he attempted aught beside the drama—even as bees construct their cells and manufacture their honey to admirable perfection, but would in vain attempt to build a nest. Now this mode of reconciling a compelled sense of inferiority with a feeling of pride began in a few pedants, who, having read that Sophocles was the great model of tragedy, and Aristotle the infallible dictator of its rules, and finding that the *Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and other masterpieces were neither in imitation of Sophocles nor in obedience to Aristotle, and not having (with one or two exceptions) the courage to affirm that the delight which their country received from generation to genera-

tion, in defiance of the alterations of circumstances and habits, was wholly groundless, took upon them, as a happy medium and refuge, to talk of Shakespeare as a sort of beautiful *lusus nature*, a delightful monster,—wild, indeed, and without taste or judgment, but, like the inspired idiots so much venerated in the East, uttering, amid the strangest follies, the sublimest truths. In nine places out of ten in which I find his awful name mentioned, it is with some epithet of “wild,” “irregular,” “pure child of nature,” etc. If all this be true, we must submit to it; though to a thinking mind it cannot but be painful to find any excellence, merely human, thrown out of all human analogy, and thereby leaving us neither rules for imitation, nor motives to imitate; but if false, it is a dangerous falsehood, for it affords a refuge to secret self-conceit,—enables a vain man at once to escape his reader’s indignation by general swollen panegyrics, and merely by his *ipse dixit* to treat as contemptible what he has not intellect enough to comprehend, or soul to feel, without assigning any reason, or referring his opinion to any demonstrative principle; thus leaving Shakespeare as a sort of Grand Llama, adored indeed, and his very excrements prized as relics, but with no authority or real influence. I grieve that every late voluminous edition of his works would enable me to substantiate the present charge with a variety of facts, one tenth of which would of themselves exhaust the time allotted to me. Every critic who has or has not made a collection of black-letter books—in itself a useful and respectable amusement—puts on the seven-league boots of self-opinion, and strides at once from an illustrator into a supreme judge, and, blind and deaf, fills his three-ounce phial at the waters of Niagara, and determines positively the greatness of the cataract to be neither more nor less than his three-ounce phial has been able to receive.

I think this a very serious subject. It is my earnest desire—my passionate endeavor—to enforce, at various times and by various arguments and instances, the close and reciprocal connection of just taste with pure morality. Without that acquaintance with the heart of man, or that docility and childlike gladness to be made acquainted with it which those only can have who dare look at their

own hearts—and that with a steadiness which religion only has the power of reconciling with sincere humility,—without this, and the modesty produced by it, I am deeply convinced that no man, however wide his erudition, however patient his antiquarian researches, can possibly understand, or be worthy of understanding, the writings of Shakespeare.

Assuredly that criticism of Shakespeare will alone be genial which is reverential. The Englishman who without reverence—a proud and affectionate reverence—can utter the name of William Shakespeare, stands disqualified for the office of critic. He wants one at least of the very senses the language of which he is to employ, and will discourse at best but as a blind man, while the whole harmonious creation of light and shade, with all its subtle interchange of deepening and dissolving colors, rises in silence to the silent fiat of the uprising Apollo. However inferior in ability I may be to some who have followed me, I own I am proud that I was the first in time who publicly demonstrated, to the full extent of the position, that the supposed irregularity and extravagances of Shakespeare were the mere dreams of a pedantry that arraigned the eagle because it had not the dimensions of the swan. In all the successive courses of lectures delivered by me, since my first attempt at the Royal Institution, it has been, and it still remains, my object to prove that, in all points, from the most important to the most minute, the judgment of Shakespeare is commensurate with his genius,—nay, that his genius reveals itself in his judgment as in its most exalted form. And the more gladly do I recur to this subject from the clear conviction that to judge aright, and with distinct consciousness of the grounds of our judgment, concerning the works of Shakespeare, implies the power and the means of judging rightly of all other works of intellect, those of abstract science alone excepted.

It is a painful truth that not only individuals, but even whole nations, are oftentimes so enslaved to the habits of their education and immediate circumstances, as not to judge disinterestedly even on those subjects the very pleasure arising from which consists in its disinterestedness, namely, on subjects of taste and polite literature.

Instead of deciding concerning their own modes and customs by any rule of reason, nothing appears rational, becoming, or beautiful to them but what coincides with the peculiarities of their education. In this narrow circle, individuals may attain to exquisite discrimination, as the French critics have done in their own literature; but a true critic can no more be such without placing himself on some central point, from which he may command the whole,—that is, some general rule which, founded in reason or the faculties common to all men, must therefore apply to each—than an astronomer can explain the movements of the solar system without taking his stand in the sun. And let me remark that this will not tend to produce despotism, but on the contrary true tolerance, in the critic. He will, indeed, require, as the spirit and substance of a work, something true in human nature itself, and independent of all circumstances; but in the mode of applying it he will estimate genius and judgment according to the felicity with which the imperishable soul of intellect shall have adapted itself to the age, the place, and the existing manners. The error he will expose lies in reversing this, and holding up the mere circumstances as perpetual, to the utter neglect of the power which can alone animate them. For art cannot exist without, or apart from, nature; and what has man of his own to give to his fellow-man, but his own thoughts and feelings, and his observations so far as they are modified by his own thoughts and feelings?

Let me, then, once more submit this question to minds emancipated alike from national, or party, or sectarian prejudice: Are the plays of Shakespeare works of rude uncultivated genius, in which the splendor of the parts compensates—if aught can compensate—for the barbarous shapelessness and irregularity of the whole? Or is the form equally admirable with the matter, and the judgment of the great poet not less deserving our wonder than his genius? Or, again, to repeat the question in other words: Is Shakespeare a great dramatic poet on account only of those beauties and excellences which he possesses in common with the ancients, but with diminished claims to our love and honor to the full extent of his differences from them? Or are these very differences additional

proofs of poetic wisdom, at once results and symbols of living power as contrasted with lifeless mechanism—of free and rival originality as contradistinguished from servile imitation or (more accurately) a blind copying of effects instead of a true imitation of the essential principles? Imagine not that I am about to oppose genius to rules. No! the comparative value of these rules is the very cause to be tried. The spirit of poetry, like all other living powers, must of necessity circumscribe itself by rules, were it only to unite power with beauty. It must embody in order to reveal itself; but a living body is of necessity an organized one; and what is organization but the connection of parts in and for a whole, so that each part is at once end and means? This is no discovery of criticism; it is a necessity of the human mind; and all nations have felt and obeyed it, in the invention of meter and measured sounds as the vehicle and *involucrum*¹ of poetry, itself a fellow-growth from the same life, even as the bark is to the tree.

No work of true genius dares want its appropriate form,² neither indeed is there any danger of this. As it must not, so genius cannot, be lawless; for it is even this that constitutes it genius—the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination. How then comes it that not only single Zoili,³ but whole nations, have combined in unhesitating condemnation of our great dramatist, as a sort of African nature, rich in beautiful monsters,—as

¹ Envelope.

² Compare Schlegel: "Works of genius cannot be allowed to be without form; but of this there is no danger. That we may answer this objection of want of form, we must first come to an understanding respecting the meaning of form, which most critics, and more specially those who insist on a stiff regularity, understand merely in a mechanical, and not in an organical sense. Form is mechanical when, through external influence, it is communicated to any material merely as an accidental addition without reference to its quality; as, for example, when we give a particular shape to a soft mass that it may retain the same after its induration. Organical form, again, is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and acquires its determination along with the complete development of the germ. We everywhere discover such forms in nature, throughout the whole range of living powers, from the crystallization of salts and minerals to plants and flowers, and from them to the human figure. In the fine arts, as well as in the province of nature, the highest artist, all genuine forms are organical, that is, determined by the quality of the work." (*Lectures on Dramatic Art*, xii; Black's translation.)

³ Critics (from Zoilus, an ancient critic of Homer).

a wild heath where islands of fertility look the greener from the surrounding waste,—where the loveliest plants now shine out among unsightly weeds, and now are choked by their parasitic growth, so intertwined that we cannot disentangle the weed without snapping the flower? In this statement I had no reference to the vulgar abuse of Voltaire,⁴ save as far as his charges are coincident with the decisions of Shakespeare's own commentators and (so they would tell you) almost idolatrous admirers. The true ground of the mistake lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material,—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms; each exterior is the physiognomy of the being within,—its true image, reflected and thrown out from the concave mirror; and even such is the appropriate excellence of her chosen poet, of our own Shakespeare,—himself a nature humanized, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper even than our consciousness.

I greatly dislike "beauties" and selections in general; but as proof positive of his unrivalled excellence, I should like to try Shakespeare by this criterion. Make out your amplest catalogue of all the human faculties, as reason or the moral law, the will, the feeling of the coincidence of the two (a feeling *sui generis et demonstratio demonstrationum*) called the conscience, the understanding or prudence, wit, fancy, imagination, judgment, and then of the objects on which these are to be employed, as the beauties, the terrors, and the seeming caprices of nature, the realities and the capabilities—that is, the actual and the ideal—of the human mind, conceived as an individual

⁴ For Voltaire's attacks on Shakespeare, see the account by T. R. Lounsbury, *Shakespeare and Voltaire*, 1902.

or as a social being, as in innocence or in guilt, in a play-paradise or in a war-field of temptation;—and then compare with Shakespeare under each of these heads all or any of the writers in prose and verse that have ever lived! Who, that is competent to judge, doubts the result? And ask your own hearts—ask your own common sense—to conceive the possibility of this man being—I say not the “drunken savage”⁵ of that wretched sciolist whom Frenchmen, to their shame, have honored before their elder and better worthies—but the anomalous, the wild, the irregular, genius of our daily criticism! What! are we to have miracles in sport? Or, I speak reverently, does God choose idiots by whom to convey divine truths to man?

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMAS

Poetry in essence is as familiar to barbarous as to civilized nations. The Laplander and the savage Indian are cheered by it as well as the inhabitants of London and Paris; its spirit takes up and incorporates surrounding materials, as a plant clothes itself with soil and climate, whilst it exhibits the working of a vital principle within independent of all accidental circumstances. And to judge with fairness of an author's works, we ought to distinguish what is inward and essential from what is outward and circumstantial. It is essential to poetry that it be simple, and appeal to the elements and primary laws of our nature; that it be sensuous, and by its imagery elicit truth at a flash; that it be impassioned, and be able to move our feelings and awaken our affections. In comparing different poets with each other, we should inquire which have brought into the fullest play our imagination and our reason, or have created the greatest excitement and produced the completest harmony. If we consider great exquisiteness of language and sweetness of meter alone, it is impossible to deny to Pope the character of a delightful writer; but whether he be a poet must depend upon our definition of the word; and, doubtless, if everything that pleases be poetry, Pope's satires

⁵ Of *Hamlet* Voltaire wrote, in his Preface to *Mérope*, “One would suppose this work to be the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage.”

and epistles must be poetry. This I must say, that poetry, as distinguished from other modes of composition, does not rest in meter, and that it is not poetry if it makes no appeal to our passions or our imagination. One character belongs to all true poets, that they write from a principle within, not originating in anything without; and that the true poet's work in its form, its shapings, and its modifications, is distinguished from all other works that assume to belong to the class of poetry, as a natural from an artificial flower, or as the mimic garden of a child from an enamelled meadow. In the former the flowers are broken from their stems and stuck into the ground; they are beautiful to the eye and fragrant to the sense, but their colors soon fade, and their odor is transient as the smile of the planter; while the meadow may be visited again and again with renewed delight; its beauty is innate in the soil, and its bloom is of the freshness of nature.⁶

The next ground of critical judgment, and point of comparison, will be as to how far a given poet has been influenced by accidental circumstances. As a living poet must surely write, not for the ages past, but for that in which he lives, and those which are to follow, it is, on the one hand, natural that he should not violate, and on the other, necessary that he should not depend on, the mere manners and modes of his day. See how little does Shakespeare leave us to regret that he was born in his particular age! The great era in modern times was what is called the Restoration of Letters; the ages preceding it are called the dark ages; but it would be more wise, perhaps, to call them the ages in which we were in the dark. It is usually overlooked that the supposed

⁶ Compare Schlegel: "Many productions which appear at first sight dazzling phenomena in the province of the fine arts, and which as a whole have been honored with the appellation of works of a golden age, resemble the mimic gardens of children: impatient to witness the work of their hands, they break off here and there branches and flowers, and plant them in the earth; everything at first assumes a noble appearance; the childish gardener struts proudly up and down among his elegant beds, till the rootless plants begin to droop, and hang down their withered leaves and flowers, and nothing soon remains but the bare twigs; while the dark forest, on which no art or care was ever bestowed, and which towered up towards heaven long before human remembrance, bears every blast unshaken, and fills the solitary beholder with religious awe." (Lecture i.)

dark period was not universal, but partial and successive, or alternate; that the dark age of England was not the dark age of Italy, but that one country was in its light and vigor whilst another was in its gloom and bondage. But no sooner had the Reformation sounded through Europe like the blast of an archangel's trumpet, than from king to peasant there arose an enthusiasm for knowledge; the discovery of a manuscript became the subject of an embassy; Erasmus read by moonlight, because he could not afford a torch, and begged a penny, not for the love of charity, but for the love of learning. The three great points of attention were religion, morals, and taste; men of genius as well as men of learning, who in this age need to be so widely distinguished, then alike became copyists of the ancients; and this, indeed, was the only way by which the taste of mankind could be improved, or their understandings informed. Whilst Dante imagined himself a humble follower of Virgil, and Ariosto of Homer, they were both unconscious of that greater power working within them, which in many points carried them beyond their supposed originals. All great discoveries bear the stamp of the age in which they are made; hence we perceive the effects of the purer religion of the moderns, visible for the most part in their lives; and in reading their works we should not content ourselves with the mere narratives of events long passed, but should learn to apply their maxims and conduct to ourselves.

Having intimated that times and manners lend their form and pressure to genius, let me once more draw a slight parallel between the ancient and modern stage, the stages of Greece and of England. The Greeks were polytheists; their religion was local; almost the only object of all their knowledge, art, and taste was their gods; and accordingly their productions were, if the expression may be allowed, statuesque, whilst those of the moderns are picturesque. The Greeks reared a structure which, in its parts and as a whole, filled the mind with the calm and elevated impression of perfect beauty and symmetrical proportion. The moderns also produced a whole, a more striking whole; but it was by blending materials and fusing the parts together. And as the Pantheon is to York Minster or Westminster Abbey, so is Sophocles

compared with Shakespeare;⁷ in the one a completeness, a satisfaction, an excellence, on which the mind rests with complacency; in the other a multitude of interlaced materials, great and little, magnificent and mean, accompanied, indeed, with the sense of a falling short of perfection, and yet, at the same time, so promising of our social and individual progression that we would not, if we could, exchange it for that repose of the mind which dwells on the forms of symmetry in the acquiescent admiration of grace. This general characteristic of the ancient and modern drama might be illustrated by a parallel of the ancient and modern music: the one consisting of melody arising from a succession only of pleasing sounds, the modern embracing harmony also, the result of combination and the effect of a whole.

I have said, and I say it again, that, great as was the genius of Shakespeare, his judgment was at least equal to it. Of this any one will be convinced who attentively considers those points in which the dramas of Greece and England differ, from the dissimilitude of circumstances by which each was modified and influenced. The Greek stage had its origin in the ceremonies of a sacrifice, such as of the goat to Bacchus, whom we most erroneously regard as merely the jolly god of wine; for among the ancients he was venerable as the symbol of that power which acts without our consciousness in the vital energies of nature—the *vinum mundi*—as Apollo was that of the conscious agency of our intellectual being. The heroes of old, under the influences of this Bacchic enthusiasm, performed more than human actions; hence tales of the favorite champions soon passed into dialogue. On the Greek stage the chorus was always before the audience; the curtain was never dropped, as we should say; and change of place being therefore, in general, impossible, the absurd notion of condemning it merely as

⁷ Compare the close of Pope's Preface to his edition of Shakespeare: "With all his faults, and with all the irregularity of his dramas, one may look upon his works, in comparison of those that are more finished and regular, as upon an ancient majestic piece of Gothic architecture, compared with a neat modern building." And Schlegel: "The Pantheon is not more different from Westminster Abbey or the church of St. Stephen at Vienna, than the structure of a tragedy of Sophocles from a drama of Shakespeare." (Lecture i.)

improbable in itself was never entertained by anyone. If we can believe ourselves at Thebes in one act, we may believe ourselves at Athens in the next.⁸ If a story lasts twenty-four hours or twenty-four years, it is equally improbable. There seems to be no just boundary but what the feelings prescribe. But on the Greek stage, where the same persons were perpetually before the audience, great judgment was necessary in venturing on any such change. The poets never, therefore, attempted to impose on the senses by bringing places to men, but they did bring men to places, as in the well-known instance in *The Eumenides*, where, during an evident retirement of the chorus from the orchestra, the scene is changed to Athens, and Orestes is first introduced in the temple of Minerva, and the chorus of Furies come in afterwards in pursuit of him.

In the Greek drama there were no formal divisions into scenes and acts; there were no means, therefore, of allowing for the necessary lapse of time between one part of the dialogue and another, and unity of time in a strict sense was, of course, impossible. To overcome that difficulty of accounting for time, which is effected on the modern stage by dropping a curtain, the judgment and great genius of the ancients supplied music and measured motion, and with the lyric ode filled up the vacuity. In the story of the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus, the capture of Troy is supposed to be announced by a fire lighted on the Asiatic shore, and the transmission of the signal by successive beacons to Mycenæ. The signal is first seen at the 21st line, but the herald from Troy itself enters at the 486th, and Agamemnon himself at the 783d line. But the practical absurdity of this was not felt by the audience, who, in imagination, stretched minutes into hours, while they listened to the lofty narrative odes of the chorus which almost entirely filled up the interspace. Another fact deserves attention here: namely, that regularly on the Greek stage a drama, or acted story, consisted in reality of three dramas, called together a trilogy, and performed consecutively in the course of one day. Now you may

⁸ Compare Dr. Johnson, in his Preface to Shakespeare: "He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolemies, may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation."

conceive a tragedy of Shakespeare's as a trilogy connected in one single representation. Divide *Lear* into three parts, and each would be a play with the ancients; or take the three Æschylean dramas of Agamemnon, and divide them into, or call them, as many acts, and they together would be one play.⁹ The first act would comprise the usurpation of Ægisthus and the murder of Agamemnon; the second, the revenge of Orestes and the murder of his mother; and the third, the penance and absolution of Orestes;—occupying a period of twenty-two years.

The stage in Shakespeare's time was a naked room with a blanket for a curtain, but he made it a field for monarchs. That law of unity which has its foundations, not in the factitious necessity of custom, but in nature itself, the unity of feeling, is everywhere and at all times observed by Shakespeare in his plays. Read *Romeo and Juliet*,—all is youth and spring; youth with its follies, its virtues, its precipitancies; spring with its odors, its flowers, and its transiency; it is one and the same feeling that commences, goes through, and ends the play. The old men, the Capulets and the Montagues, are not common old men; they have an eagerness, a heartiness, a vehemence, the effect of spring; with Romeo, his change of passion, his sudden marriage, and his rash death, are all the effects of youth; whilst in Juliet love has all that is tender and melancholy in the nightingale, all that is voluptuous in the rose, with whatever is sweet in the freshness of spring; but it ends with a long deep sigh like the last breeze of the Italian evening.¹⁰ This unity of feeling and character pervades every drama of Shakespeare.

It seems to me that his plays are distinguished from those of all other dramatic poets by the following characteristics:—

⁹ Compare Schlegel: "We may consider the three pieces [of the Æschylean trilogy], which were connected together even in the representation, as so many acts of one great and entire drama. I mention this as a preliminary justification of Shakespeare and other modern poets, in connecting together in one representation a larger circle of human destinies." (Lecture iv.)

¹⁰ Compare Schlegel: "Whatever is most intoxicating in the odor of a southern spring, languishing in the song of the nightingale, or voluptuous on the first opening of the rose, is breathed into this poem." (Lecture xii.)

1. Expectation in preference to surprise. It is like the true reading of the passage, "God said, Let there be light; and there was *light*,"—not, "there *was* light." As the feeling with which we startle at a shooting star compared with that of watching the sunrise at the pre-established moment, such and so low is surprise compared with expectation.

2. Signal adherence to the great law of nature, that all opposites tend to attract and temper each other. Passion in Shakespeare generally displays libertinism, but involves morality; and if there are exceptions to this, they are—independently of their intrinsic value—all of them indicative of individual character, and, like the farewell admonitions of a parent, have an end beyond the parental relation. Thus the Countess's beautiful precepts to Bertram,¹¹ by elevating her character, raise that of Helena her favorite, and soften down the point in her which Shakespeare does not mean us not to see, but to see and to forgive, and at length to justify. And so it is in Polonius, who is the personified memory of wisdom no longer actually possessed. This admirable character is always misrepresented on the stage. Shakespeare never intended to exhibit him as a buffoon; for although it was natural that Hamlet—a young man of fire and genius, detesting formality, and disliking Polonius on political grounds, as imagining that he had assisted his uncle in his usurpation—should express himself satirically, yet this must not be taken as exactly the poet's conception of him. In Polonius a certain induration of character had arisen from long habits of business; but take his advice to Laertes, and Ophelia's reverence for his memory, and we shall see that he was meant to be represented as a statesman somewhat past his faculties,—his recollections of life all full of wisdom, and showing a knowledge of human nature, whilst what immediately takes place before him, and escapes from him, is indicative of weakness. But as in Homer all the deities are in armor, even Venus, so in Shakespeare all the characters are strong. Hence real folly and dulness are made by him the vehicles of wisdom. There is no difficulty for one being a fool to

¹¹ *All's Well*, I, i, 70-79.

imitate a fool; but to be, remain, and speak like a wise man and a great wit, and yet so as to give a vivid representation of a veritable fool, *hic labor, hoc opus est*. A drunken constable is not uncommon, nor hard to draw; but see and examine what goes to make up a Dogberry.

3. Keeping at all times in the high road of life. Shakespeare has no innocent adulteries, no interesting incests, no virtuous vice; he never renders that amiable which religion and reason alike teach us to detest, or clothes impurity in the garb of virtue, like Beaumont and Fletcher, the Kotzebues¹² of the day. Shakespeare's fathers are roused by ingratitude, his husbands stung by unfaithfulness; in him, in short, the affections are wounded in those points in which all may—nay, must—feel. Let the morality of Shakespeare be contrasted with that of the writers of his own or the succeeding age, or of those of the present day, who boast their superiority in this respect. No one can dispute that the result of such a comparison is altogether in favor of Shakespeare; even the letters of women of high rank in his age were often coarser than his writings. If he occasionally disgusts a keen sense of delicacy, he never injures the mind; he neither excites nor flatters passion, in order to degrade the subject of it; he does not use the faulty thing for a faulty purpose, nor carries on warfare against virtue by causing wickedness to appear as no wickedness, through the medium of a morbid sympathy with the unfortunate. In Shakespeare vice never walks as in twilight; nothing is purposely out of place; he inverts not the order of nature and propriety,—does not make every magistrate a drunkard or glutton, nor every poor man meek, humane, and temperate; he has no benevolent butchers, or sentimental rat-catchers.

4. Independence of the dramatic interest on the plot. The interest in the plot is always in fact on account of the characters, not *vice versa*, as in almost all other writers; the plot is a mere canvas and no more. Hence arises the true justification of the same strategem being used in regard to Benedick and Beatrice,¹³—the vanity in each being alike. Take away from the *Much Ado about*

¹² Kotzebue was a sensational German dramatist (1761-1819).

¹³ *Much Ado*, II, iii and III, i.

Nothing all that which is not indispensable to the plot, either as having little to do with it, or, at best, like Dogberry and his comrades, forced into the service, when any other less ingeniously absurd watchmen and night-constables would have answered the mere necessities of the action,—take away Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, and the reaction of the former on the character of Hero,—and what will remain? In other writers the main agent of the plot is always the prominent character; in Shakespeare it is so, or is not so, as the character is in itself calculated, or not calculated, to form the plot. Don John is the mainspring of the plot of this play, but he is merely shown and then withdrawn.

5. Independence of the interest on the story as the groundwork of the plot. Hence Shakespeare never took the trouble of inventing stories. It was enough for him to select, from those that had been already invented or recorded, such as had one or other, or both, of two recommendations,—namely, suitableness to his particular purpose, and their being parts of popular tradition,—names of which we had often heard, and of their fortunes, and as to which all we wanted was, to see the man himself. So it is just the man himself, the Lear, the Shylock, the Richard, that Shakespeare makes us for the first time acquainted with. Omit the first scene in *Lear*, and yet everything will remain; so the first and second scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*. Indeed it is universally true.

6. Interfusion of the lyrical—that which in its very essence is poetic—not only with the dramatic, as in the plays of Metastasio,¹⁴ where at the end of the scene comes the *aria* as the exit speech of the character, but also in and through the dramatic. Songs in Shakespeare are introduced as songs only, just as songs are in real life, beautifully as some of them are characteristic of the person who has sung or called for them, as Desdemona's "Willow," and Ophelia's wild snatches, and the sweet carolings in *As You Like It*. But the whole of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* is one continued specimen of the dramatized lyrical. And observe how exquisitely the dramatic of Hotspur—

¹⁴ An Italian poet (1698-1782).

Marry, and I'm glad on't with all my heart;
I'd rather be a kitten and cry mew, etc.—

melts away into the lyric of Mortimer:—

I understand thy looks; that pretty Welsh
Which thou pour'st down from these swelling heavens
I am too perfect in, etc.

(*I Henry IV*, Act III, Scene i.)

7. The characters of the *dramatis personæ*, like those in real life, are to be inferred by the reader; they are not told to him. And it is well worth remarking that Shakespeare's characters, like those in real life, are very commonly misunderstood, and almost always understood by different persons in different ways. The causes are the same in either case. If you take only what the friends of the character say, you may be deceived, and still more so if that which his enemies say; nay, even the character himself sees himself through the medium of his character, and not exactly as he is. Take all together, not omitting a shrewd hint from the clown or the fool, and perhaps your impression will be right; and you may know whether you have in fact discovered the poet's own idea, by all the speeches receiving light from it, and at-testing its reality by reflecting it.

Lastly, in Shakespeare the heterogeneous is united, as it is in nature. You must not suppose a pressure or passion always acting on or in the character; passion in Shakespeare is that by which the individual is distinguished from others, not that which makes a different kind of him. Shakespeare followed the main march of the human affections. He entered into no analysis of the passions or faiths of men, but assured himself that such and such passions and faiths were grounded in our common nature, and not in the mere accidents of ignorance or disease. This is an important consideration, and constitutes our Shakespeare the morning star, the guide and the pioneer, of true philosophy.

HAMLET

The seeming inconsistencies in the conduct and character of Hamlet have long exercised the conjectural ingenuity of critics; and, as we are always loth to suppose

that the cause of defective apprehension is in ourselves, the mystery has been too commonly explained by the very easy process of setting it down as in fact inexplicable, and by resolving the phenomenon into a misgrowth or *lusus* of the capricious and irregular genius of Shakespeare. The shallow and stupid arrogance of these vulgar and indolent decisions I would fain do my best to expose. I believe the character of Hamlet may be traced to Shakespeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy. Indeed, that this character must have some connection with the common fundamental laws of our nature may be assumed from the fact that Hamlet has been the darling of every country in which the literature of England has been fostered. In order to understand him, it is essential that we should reflect on the constitution of our own minds. Man is distinguished from the brute animals in proportion as thought prevails over sense; but in the healthy processes of the mind, a balance is constantly maintained between the impressions from outward objects and the inward operations of the intellect; for if there be an overbalance in the contemplative faculty, man thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation, and loses his natural power of action. Now one of Shakespeare's modes of creating characters is to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakespeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds,—an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts, and the images of his fancy, are far more vivid than his actual perceptions, and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the medium of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a color not naturally their own. Hence we see a great—an almost enormous—intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action, consequent upon it, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities.¹⁵ This character Shakespeare

¹⁵ Compare Schlegel: "The whole [play] is intended to show that a consideration which would exhaust all the relations and

places in circumstances under which it is obliged to act on the spur of the moment; Hamlet is brave and careless of death, but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve. Thus it is that this tragedy presents a direct contrast to that of *Macbeth*; the one proceeds with the utmost slowness, the other with a crowded and breathless rapidity.

The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without,—giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all commonplace actualities. It is the nature of thought to be indefinite; definiteness belongs to external imagery alone. Hence it is that the sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the beholder's reflection upon it,—not from the sensuous impression, but from the imaginative reflex. Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something akin to disappointment; it is only subsequently that the image comes back full into the mind, and brings with it a train of grand or beautiful associations. Hamlet feels this; his senses are in a state of trance, and he looks upon external things as hieroglyphics. His soliloquy—

O that this too, too solid flesh would melt! etc.—¹⁶

springs from that craving after the indefinite—for that which is not—which most easily besets men of genius; and the self-delusion common to this temper of mind is finely exemplified in the character which Hamlet gives of himself:

possible consequences of a deed, to the very limits of human foresight, cripples the power of acting." (Lecture xii.) See also a remark of Coleridge's recorded in the *Table Talk*: "[Hamlet] does not want courage, skill, will, or opportunity; but every incident sets him thinking; and it is curious, and at the same time strictly natural, that Hamlet, who all the play seems reason itself, should be impelled at last by mere accident to effect his object. I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so."

¹⁶ I, ii, 129.

It cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd, and lack gall
To make oppression bitter.¹⁷

He mistakes the seeing his chains for the breaking them, delays action till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident.

There is a great significancy in the names of Shakespeare's plays. In the *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *Winter's Tale*, the total effect is produced by a co-ordination of the characters as in a wreath of flowers. But in *Coriolanus*, *Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, etc., the effect arises from the subordination of all to one, either as the prominent person, or the principal object. *Cymbeline* is the only exception; and even that has its advantages in preparing the audience for the chaos of time, place, and costume, by throwing the date back into a fabulous king's reign.

But as of more importance, so more striking, is the judgment displayed by our truly dramatic poet, as well as poet of the drama, in the management of his first scenes. With the single exception of *Cymbeline*, they either place before us at one glance both the past and the future in some effect, which implies the continuance and full agency of its cause, as in the feuds and party-spirit of the servants of the two houses in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*; or in the degrading passion for shows and public spectacles, and the overwhelming attachment for the newest successful war-chief, in the Roman people, already become a populace, contrasted with the jealousy of the nobles, in *Julius Cæsar*;—or they at once commence the action so as to excite a curiosity for the explanation in the following scenes, as in the storm of wind and waves and the boatswain in *The Tempest*, instead of anticipating our curiosity, as in most other first scenes, and in too many other first acts;—or they act, by contrast of diction suited to the characters, at once to heighten the effects, and yet to give a naturalness to the language and rhythm of the principal personages, either as that of Prospero and Miranda, by the appropriate lowness of the style, or as in *King John*, by the equally

¹⁷ II, ii, 604-06.

appropriate stateliness of official harangues or narratives, so that the after blank verse seems to belong to the rank and quality of the speakers, and not to the poet;—or they strike at once the key-note, and give the predominant spirit of the play, as in the *Twelfth Night* and in *Macbeth*;—or finally, the first scene comprises all these advantages at once, as in *Hamlet*.

Compare the easy language of common life, in which this drama commences, with the direful music and wild wayward rhythm and abrupt lyrics of the opening of *Macbeth*. The tone is quite familiar;—there is no poetic description of night, no elaborate information conveyed by one speaker to another of what both had immediately before their senses (such as the first distich in Addison's *Cato*,¹⁸ which is a translation into poetry of "Past four o'clock and a dark morning!"); and yet nothing bordering on the comic on the one hand, nor any striving of the intellect on the other. It is precisely the language of sensation among men who feared no charge of effeminacy for feeling what they had no want of resolution to bear. Yet the armor, the dead silence, the watchfulness that first interrupts it, the welcome relief of the guard, the cold, the broken expressions of compelled attention to bodily feelings still under control—all excellently accord with, and prepare for, the after gradual rise into tragedy,—but, above all, into a tragedy the interest of which is as eminently *ad et apud intra* as that of *Macbeth* is directly *ad extra*.¹⁹

In all the best attested stories of ghosts and visions, as in that of Brutus, of Archbishop Cranmer, that of Benvenuto Cellini recorded by himself, and the vision of Galileo communicated by him to his favorite pupil, Torricelli, the ghost-seers were in a state of cold or chilling damp from without, and of anxiety inwardly. It has been with all of them as with Francisco on his guard,—alone, in the depth and silence of the night;—"twas bitter cold, and they were sick at heart, and *not a mouse stirring*." The attention to minute sounds—naturally

¹⁸ The dawn is overcast, the morning lowers,

And heavily in clouds brings on the day.

¹⁹ As eminently directed toward, and concerned with, internal matters, as that of *Macbeth* is directed toward externals.

associated with the recollection of minute objects, and the more familiar and trifling the more impressive from the unusualness of their producing any impression at all—gives a philosophic pertinency to this last image; but it has likewise its dramatic use and purpose. For its commonness in ordinary conversation tends to produce the sense of reality, and in its component parts, though not in the whole composition, really is the language of nature. If I should not speak it, I feel that I should be thinking it;—the voice only is the poet's, the words are my own. That Shakespeare meant to put an effect in the actor's power in the very first words—"Who's there?"—is evident from the impatience expressed by the startled Francisco in the words that follow—"Nay, answer me: stand and unfold yourself." A brave man is never so peremptory as when he fears that he is afraid. Observe the gradual transition from the silence and the still recent habit of listening, in Francisco's "I think I hear them," to the more cheerful call out, which a good actor would observe, in the "Stand ho! Who is there?" Bernardo's inquiry after Horatio, and the repetition of his name and in his own presence, indicate a respect or an eagerness that implies him as one of the persons who are in the foreground; and the skepticism attributed to him—

Horatio says, 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him—

prepares us for Hamlet's after-eulogy on him as one whose blood and judgment were happily commingled. The actor should also be careful to distinguish the expectation and gladness of Bernardo's "Welcome, Horatio!" from the mere courtesy of his "Welcome, good Marcellus!"

Now observe the admirable indefiniteness of the first opening out of the occasion of all this anxiety. The preparation informative of the audience is just as much as was precisely necessary, and no more;—it begins with the uncertainty appertaining to a question:

What! has *this thing* appeared again to-night?

Even the word "again" has its *credibilizing* effect. Then Horatio, the representative of the ignorance of the audi-

encé, not himself, but by Marcellus to Bernardo, anticipates the common solution—" 'tis but our fantasy!" upon which Marcellus rises into

This dreaded sight, twice seen of us—

which immediately afterwards becomes "this apparition," and that, too, an intelligent spirit, that is, to be spoken to! Then comes the confirmation of Horatio's disbelief,—

Tush! tush! 'twill not appear!—

and the silence, with which the scene opened, is again restored in the shivering feeling of Horatio sitting down, at such a time, and with the two eye-witnesses, to hear a story of a ghost, and that, too, of a ghost which had appeared twice before at the very same hour. In the deep feeling which Bernardo has of the solemn nature of what he is about to relate, he makes an effort to master his own imaginative terrors by an elevation of style,—itself a continuation of the effort,—and by turning off from the apparition, as from something which would force him too deeply into himself, to the outward objects, the realities of nature, which had accompanied it:

Last night of all,
When yon same star, that's westward from the pole,
Had made his course to illume that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one.

This passage seems to contradict the critical law that what is told makes a faint impression compared with what is beholden; for it does indeed convey to the mind more than the eye can see; whilst the interruption of the narrative at the very moment when we are most intensely listening for the sequel, and have our thoughts diverted from the dreaded sight in expectation of the desired, yet almost dreaded, tale—this gives all the suddenness and surprise of the original appearance;—

Peace, break thee off; look, where it comes again!—

Note the judgment displayed in having the two persons present, who, as having seen the ghost before, are natu-

rally eager in confirming their former opinions, whilst the skeptic is silent, and, after having been twice addressed by his friends, answers with two hasty syllables—"Most like,"—and a confession of horror:

It harrows me with fear and wonder.

O heaven! words are wasted on those who feel, and to those who do not feel the exquisite judgment of Shakespeare in this scene, what can be said? Hume himself could not but have had faith in this ghost dramatically, let his anti-ghostism have been as strong as Samson against other ghosts less powerfully raised.

MACBETH

Macbeth stands in contrast throughout with *Hamlet*; in the manner of opening more especially. In the latter, there is a gradual ascent from the simplest forms of conversation to the language of impassioned intellect,—yet the intellect still remaining the seat of passion: in the former, the invocation is at once made to the imagination and the emotions connected therewith. Hence the movement throughout is the most rapid of all Shakespeare's plays; and hence also, with the exception of the disgusting passage of the Porter (Act II, sc. iii), which I dare pledge myself to demonstrate to be an interpolation of the actors,²⁰ there is not, to the best of my remembrance, a single pun or play on words in the whole drama.²¹ I have previously given an answer to the thousand times' repeated charge against Shakespeare upon the subject of his punning, and I here merely mention the fact of the absence of any puns in *Macbeth*, as justifying a candid doubt, at least, whether even in these figures of speech

²⁰ On this passage Hartley Coleridge wrote: "My father seemed inclined to reject as not genuine in Shakespeare whatever was not worthy of Shakespeare." The "porter scene" is now universally accepted as Shakespearean; see the notes on the question in Furness's New Variorum edition.

²¹ Compare Schlegel: "I cannot find that Shakespeare had such an invincible and immoderate passion for plays on words. It is true he often makes a most lavish use of this figure; in other pieces he has introduced it very sparingly; and in some of them, for example in *Macbeth*, I do not believe that the least vestige of it is to be found." (Lecture xii.)

and fanciful modifications of language Shakespeare may not have followed rules and principles that merit and would stand the test of philosophic examination. And hence, also, there is an entire absence of comedy, nay, even of irony and philosophic contemplation in *Macbeth*,—the play being wholly and purely tragic. For the same cause, there are no reasonings of equivocal morality, which would have required a more leisurely state and a consequently greater activity of mind;—no sophistry of self-delusion,—except only that, previously to the dreadful act, Macbeth mistranslates the recoilings and ominous whispers of conscience into prudential and selfish reasonings, and, after the deed done, the terrors of remorse into fear from external dangers,—like delirious men who run away from the phantoms of their own brains, or, raised by terror to rage, stab the real object that is within their reach:—whilst Lady Macbeth merely endeavors to reconcile his and her own sinkings of heart by anticipations of the worst, and an affected bravado in confronting them. In all the rest, Macbeth's language is the grave utterance of the very heart, conscience-sick, even to the last faintings of moral death. It is the same in all the other characters. The variety arises from rage, caused ever and anon by disruption of anxious thought, and the quick transition of fear into it.

In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* the scene opens with superstition; but in each it is not merely different, but opposite. In the first it is connected with the best and holiest feelings; in the second with the shadowy, turbulent, and unsanctified cravings of the individual will. Nor is the purpose the same: in the one the object is to excite, whilst in the other it is to mark a mind already excited. Superstition, of one sort or another, is natural to victorious generals; the instances are too notorious to need mentioning. There is so much of chance in warfare, and such vast events are connected with the acts of a single individual, the representative, in truth, of the efforts of myriads, and yet to the public, and doubtless to his own feelings, the aggregate of all,—that the proper temperament for generating or receiving superstitious impressions is naturally produced. Hope, the master element of a commanding genius, meeting with an active

and combining intellect, and an imagination of just that degree of vividness which disquiets and impels the soul to try to realize its images, greatly increases the creative power of the mind; and hence the images become a satisfying world in themselves, as is the case in every poet and original philosopher;—but hope fully gratified, and yet the elementary basis of the passion remaining, becomes fear; and indeed, the general, who must often feel, even though he may hide it from his own consciousness, how large a share chance had in his successes, may very naturally be irresolute in a new scene, where he knows that all will depend on his own act and election.

The Weird Sisters are as true a creation of Shakespeare's as his Ariel and Caliban,—fates, furies, and materializing witches being the elements. They are wholly different from any representation of witches in the contemporary writers, and yet presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice to act immediately on the audience. Their character consists in the imaginative disconnected from the good; they are the shadowy obscure and fearfully anomalous of physical nature, the lawless of human nature,—elemental avengers without sex or kin:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover thro' the fog and filthy air.

How much it were to be wished, in playing *Macbeth*, that an attempt should be made to introduce the flexible character-mask of the ancient pantomime;—that Flaxman²² would contribute his genius to the embodying and making sensuously perceptible that of Shakespeare!

The style and rhythm of the Captain's speeches in the second scene should be illustrated by reference to the interlude in *Hamlet*,²³ in which the epic is substituted for the tragic, in order to make the latter be felt as the real-life diction. In *Macbeth*, the poet's object was to raise

²² A distinguished sculptor (1755-1826). For the idea, compare Shelley, p. 287. It is interesting to note that the dramatist Maeterlinck, in the period of his early symbolic writings, also expressed a wish for a return to the Greek method of representing tragic characters in comparatively impersonal masks.

²³ III, ii, 165 ff.

the mind at once to the high tragic tone, that the audience might be ready for the precipitate consummation of guilt in the early part of the play. The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches is to strike the key-note of the character of the whole drama, as is proved by their re-appearance in the third scene, after such an order of the king's as establishes their supernatural power of information. I say information,—for so it only is as to Glamis and Cawdor; the “king hereafter” was still contingent—still in Macbeth's moral will; although, if he should yield to the temptation, and thus forfeit his free agency, the link of cause and effect *more physico* would then commence. I need not say that the general idea is all that can be required from the poet,—not a scholastic logical consistency in all the parts so as to meet metaphysical objectors. But O! how truly Shakespearian is the opening of Macbeth's character given in the *unpossessedness* of Banquo's mind, wholly present to the present object,—an unsullied, unscarified mirror! And how strictly true to nature it is that Banquo, and not Macbeth himself, directs our notice to the effect produced on Macbeth's mind, rendered temptable by previous dalliance of the fancy with ambitious thoughts:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

And then, again, still unintroitive, addresses the Witches:

I' the name of truth,
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show?

Banquo's questions are those of natural curiosity,—such as a girl would put after hearing a gypsy tell her school-fellow's fortune,—all perfectly general, or rather planless. But Macbeth, lost in thought, raises himself to speech only by the Witches being about to depart:

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:—

and all that follows is reasoning on a problem already discussed in his mind,—on a hope which he welcomes, and

the doubts concerning the attainment of which he wishes to have cleared up. Compare his eagerness,—the keen eye with which he has pursued the Witches' evanishing—

Speak, I charge you!—

with the easily satisfied mind of the self-uninterested Banquo:

The air hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them:—whither are they vanish'd?

and then Macbeth's earnest reply:

Into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted
As breath into the wind—*Would they had stay'd!*

Is it too minute to notice the appropriateness of the simile "as breath," etc., in a cold climate?

Still again Banquo goes on wondering, like any common spectator:

Were such things here as we do speak about?

whilst Macbeth persists in recurring to the self-concerning:

Your children shall be kings.

Ban. You shall be king.

Macb. And thane of Cawdor too: went it not so?

So surely is the guilt in its germ anterior to the supposed cause, and immediate temptation! Before he can cool, the confirmation of the tempting half of the prophecy arrives, and the concatenating tendency of the imagination is fostered by the sudden coincidence:

Glamis, and thane of Cawdor:
The greatest is behind.

Oppose this to Banquo's simple surprise: "What, can the devil speak true?"

KEATS'S "ENDYMION"

JOHN WILSON CROKER

[This famous review, falsely reputed to have wounded Keats so deeply as to cause his death, appeared in the *Quarterly Review* for April, 1818. Croker's authorship became known only after many years.]

Reviewers have been sometimes accused of not reading the works which they affected to criticize. On the present occasion we shall anticipate the author's complaint, and honestly confess that we have not read his work. Not that we have been wanting in our duty—far from it; indeed we have made efforts almost as superhuman as the story itself appears to be, to get through it; but with the fullest stretch of our perseverance we are forced to confess that we have not been able to struggle beyond the first of the four books of which this Poetic Romance consists. We should extremely lament this want of energy, or whatever it may be, on our parts, were it not for one consolation,—namely, that we are no better acquainted with the meaning of the book through which we have so painfully toiled, than we are with that of the three which we have not looked into.

It is not that Mr. Keats (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody),—it is not, we say, that the author has not powers of language, rays of fancy, and gleams of genius; he has all these; but he is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry, which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language. Of this school Mr. Leigh Hunt, as we observed in a former number, aspires to be the hierophant. Our readers will recollect the pleasant recipes for harmonious and sublime poetry which he gave us in his preface to *Rimini*,¹ and the still more facetious instances of his harmony and sublimity in the verses themselves;

¹ In this Preface Hunt attacked the versification of the school of Pope, and also advocated, like Wordsworth, poetic language "in nothing different from that of real life."

and they will recollect above all the contempt of Pope, Johnson, and such like poetasters and pseudo-critics, which so forcibly contrasted itself with Mr. Leigh Hunt's self-complacent approbation of

all the things itself had wrote,
Of special merit though of little note.*

This author is a copyist of Mr. Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype, who, though he impudently presumed to seat himself in the chair of criticism and to measure his own poetry by his own standard, yet generally had a meaning. But Mr. Keats has advanced no dogmas which he was bound to support by examples; his nonsense therefore is quite gratuitous; he writes it for its own sake, and, being bitten by Mr. Leigh Hunt's insane criticism, more than rivals the insanity of his poetry.

Mr. Keats's preface hints that his poem was produced under peculiar circumstances. "Knowing within myself," he says, "the manner in which this poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public. What manner I mean will be *quite clear* to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt rather than a deed accomplished." We humbly beg his pardon, but this does not appear to us to be *quite so clear*—we really do not know what he means; but the next passage is more intelligible. "The first two books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press." Thus "the two first books" are, even in his own judgment, unfit to appear, and "the two last" are, it seems, in the same condition; and as two and two make four, and as that is the whole number of books, we have a clear and, we believe, a very just estimate of the entire work.

Mr. Keats, however, deprecates criticism on this "immature and feverish work" in terms which are themselves sufficiently feverish; and we confess that we should have abstained from inflicting upon him any of the tortures

* From Churchill's *Rosciad*, lines 155-6.

of the "fierce hell" of criticism, which terrify his imagination, if he had not begged to be spared in order that he might write more,—if we had not observed in him a certain degree of talent which deserves to be put in the right way, or which at least ought to be warned of the wrong; and if, finally, he had not told us that he is of an age and temper which imperiously require mental discipline.

Of the story we have been able to make out but little; it seems to be mythological, and probably relates to the loves of Diana and Endymion; but of this, as the scope of the work has altogether escaped us, we cannot speak with any degree of certainty, and must therefore content ourselves with giving some instances of its diction and versification;—and here again we are perplexed and puzzled. At first it appeared to us that Mr. Keats had been amusing himself and wearying his readers with an immeasurable game at *bouts-rimés*;³ but, if we recollect rightly, it is an indispensable condition at this play that the rhymes when filled up shall have a meaning, and our author, as we have already hinted, has no meaning. He seems to us to write a line at random, and then he follows not the thought excited by this line, but that suggested by the rhyme with which it concludes. There is hardly a complete couplet enclosing a complete idea in the whole book. He wanders from one subject to another, from the association, not of the ideas but of sounds, and the work is composed of hemistichs which, it is quite evident, have forced themselves upon the author by the mere force of the catchwords on which they turn.

We shall select, not as the most striking instance, but as that least liable to suspicion, a passage from the opening of the poem.

Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid-forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead; etc., etc.

³ A contest in fitting verses to end-rimes.

Here it is clear that the word, and not the idea, *moon* produces the simple sheep and their shady *boon*, and that "the *dooms* of the mighty dead" would never have intruded themselves but for the "fair musk-rose blooms." Again:—

For 't was the morn: Apollo's upward fire
Made every eastern cloud a silvery pyre
Of brightness so unsullied that therein
A melancholy spirit well might win
Oblivion, and melt out his essence fine
Into the winds; rain-scented eglantine
Gave temperate sweets to that well-wooing sun;
The lark was lost in him; cold springs had run
To warm their chilliest bubbles in the grass;
Man's voice was on the mountains; and the mass
Of nature's lives and wonders puls'd tenfold,
To feel this sunrise and its glories old.

Here Apollo's *fire* produces a *pyre*, a silvery pyre of clouds, *wherein* a spirit might *win* oblivion and melt his essence *fine*, and scented *eglantine* gives sweets to the *sun*, and cold springs had *run* into the *grass*, and then the pulse of the *mass* pulsed *ten-fold* to feel the glories *old* of the new-born day, etc.

One example more.

Be still the unimaginable lodge
For solitary thinkings, such as dodge
Conception to the very bourne of heaven,
Then leave the naked brain; be still the leaven
That spreading in this dull and clodded earth
Gives it a touch ethereal—a new birth.

lodge, dodge—heaven, leaven—earth, birth; such, in six words, is the sum and substance of six lines.

We come now to the author's taste in versification. He cannot indeed write a sentence, but perhaps he may be able to spin a line. Let us see. The following are specimens of his prosodial notions of our English heroic meter.

Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite.

So plenteously all weed-hidden roots.

Of some strange history, potent to send.

Before the deep intoxication.

Her scarf into a fluttering pavilion.

The stubborn canvas for my voyage prepared.

Endymion! the cave is secreter
Than the isle of Delos. Echo hence shall stir
No sighs but sigh-warm kisses, or light noise
Of thy combing hand, the while it traveling cloy
And trembles through my labyrinthine hair.

By this time our readers must be pretty well satisfied as to the meaning of his sentences and the structure of his lines; we now present them with some of the new words with which, in imitation of Mr. Leigh Hunt, he adorns our language. We are told that "turtles *passion* their voices"; that "an harbour was *nested*," and a lady's locks "*gordian'd* up"; and, to supply the place of the nouns thus verbalized, Mr. Keats with great fecundity spawns new ones, such as "men-slugs and human *serpentry*," the "*honey-feel* of bliss," "wives prepare *needments*," and so forth.

Then he has formed new verbs by the process of cutting off their natural tails, the adverbs, and affixing them to their foreheads; thus, "the wine out-sparkled," the "multitude up-followed," and "night up-took"; "the wind up-blows," and the "hours are down-sunken." But if he sinks some adverbs in the verbs, he compensates the language with adverbs and adjectives which he separates from the parent stock. Thus a lady "whispers *pantingly* and close," makes "*hushing* signs," and steers her skiff into a "*rippy* cove"; a shower falls "*refreshfully*," and a vulture has a "*spreaded* tail."

But enough of Mr. Leigh Hunt and his simple neophyte. If any one should be bold enough to purchase this "Poetic Romance," and so much more patient than ourselves as to get beyond the first book, and so much more fortunate as to find a meaning, we entreat him to make us acquainted with his success; we shall then return to the task which we now abandon in despair, and endeavor to make all due amends to Mr. Keats and to our readers.

THE COCKNEY SCHOOL OF POETRY: KEATS

[A savage series of articles attacking "the Cockney school" (which consisted, in the writer's view, of Leigh Hunt, Keats, and their London friends) appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1817-19, signed "Z." The authorship has never been made certain; the most plausible claimant appears to be John G. Lockhart, later editor of the *Quarterly*. The present paper, dealing with *Endymion*, was the fourth of the series, appearing in the number for August, 1818.]

Of all the manias of this mad age, the most incurable, as well as the most common, seems to be no other than the *metromanie*. The just celebrity of Robert Burns and Miss Baillie¹ has had the melancholy effect of turning the heads of we know not how many farm-servants and unmarried ladies; our very footmen compose tragedies, and there is scarcely a superannuated governess in the island that does not leave a roll of lyrics behind her in her band-box. To witness the disease of any human understanding, however feeble, is distressing; but the spectacle of an able mind reduced to a state of insanity is of course ten times more afflicting. It is with such sorrow as this that we have contemplated the case of Mr. John Keats. This young man appears to have received from nature talents of an excellent, perhaps even of a superior order,—talents which, devoted to the purposes of any useful profession, must have rendered him a respectable if not an eminent citizen. His friends, we understand, destined him to the career of medicine, and he was bound apprentice some years ago to a worthy apothecary in town. But all has been undone by a sudden attack of the malady to which we have alluded. Whether Mr. John had been sent home with a diuretic or composing draught to some patient far gone in the poetical mania, we have not heard. This much is certain, that he has caught the infection, and that thoroughly. For some time we were in hopes that he might get off with a violent fit or two, but of late the symptoms are terrible. The frenzy of the *Poems* was bad enough in its way, but it did not alarm us half

¹ Joanna Baillie (1762-1851), author of a number of poetic dramas.

so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable driveling idiocy of the *Endymion*. We hope, however, that in so young a person, and with a constitution originally so good, even now the disease is not utterly incurable. Time, firm treatment, and rational restraint, do much for many apparently hopeless invalids; and if Mr. Keats should happen, at some interval of reason, to cast his eye upon our pages, he may perhaps be convinced of the existence of his malady, which in such cases is often all that is necessary to put the patient in a fair way of being cured.

The readers of the *Examiner* newspaper were informed, some time ago, by a solemn paragraph in Mr. Hunt's best style, of the appearance of two new stars of glorious magnitude and splendor in the poetical horizon of the land of Cockaigne. One of these turned out, by and by, to be no other than Mr. John Keats. This precocious adulation confirmed the wavering apprentice in his desire to quit the gallipots, and at the same time excited in his too susceptible mind a fatal admiration for the character and talents of the most worthless and affected of all the versifiers of our time. One of his first productions was the following sonnet, "Written on the day when Mr. Leigh Hunt left prison." It will be recollected that the cause of Hunt's confinement was a series of libels against his sovereign, and that its fruit was the odious and incestuous *Story of Rimini*.²

What though, for showing truth to flattered state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he
 In his immortal spirit been as free
 As the sky-searching lark and as elate.
 Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?
 Think you he nought but prison walls did see,
 Till, so unwilling, thou unturnd'st the key?
 Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate!

² Hunt was confined in the Surrey jail, 1813-1815, because of an article in which he had described the Prince Regent as "a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers," etc. While in prison he composed *Rimini*, a version of the old story of Paolo and Francesca, which his enemies were pleased to represent as immoral, because it treated sympathetically of the love of Paolo for his brother's wife.

*In Spenser's halls he strayed, and bowers fair,
Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew
With daring Milton through the fields of air;
To regions of his own his genius true
Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?*

The absurdity of the thought in this sonnet is, however, if possible, surpassed in another, "addressed to Haydon" the painter, that clever but most affected artist, who as little resembles Raphael in genius as he does in person, notwithstanding the foppery of having his hair curled over his shoulders in the old Italian fashion. In this exquisite piece it will be observed that Mr. Keats classes together Wordsworth, Hunt, and Haydon, as the three greatest spirits of the age, and that he alludes to himself, and some others of the rising brood of Cockneys, as likely to attain hereafter an equally honorable elevation. Wordsworth and Hunt! what a juxtaposition! The purest, loftiest, and, we do not fear to say it, the most classical of living English poets, joined together in the same compliment with the meanest, filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters. No wonder that he who could be guilty of this should class Haydon with Raphael, and himself with Spenser.

*Great spirits now on earth are sojourning;
He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing:
He of the rose, the violet, the spring,
The social smile, the chain for Freedom's sake:
And lo! whose steadfastness would never take
A meaner sound than Raphael's whispering.
And other spirits there are standing apart
Upon the forehead of the age to come;
These, these will give the world another heart,
And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum
Of mighty workings?—
Listen awhile, ye nations, and be dumb.*

The nations are to listen and be dumb! And why, good Johnny Keats? Because Leigh Hunt is editor of the *Examiner*, and Haydon has painted the Judgment of

Solomon, and you and Cornelius Webb,³ and a few more city sparks, are pleased to look upon yourselves as so many future Shakespeares and Miltons. The world has really some reason to look to its foundations! Here is a *tempestas in matula* with a vengeance. At the period when these sonnets were published Mr. Keats had no hesitation in saying that he looked on himself as "*not yet* a glorious denizen of the wide heaven of poetry," but he had many fine soothing visions of coming greatness, and many rare plans of study to prepare him for it. The following we think is very pretty raving.

Why so sad a moan?
Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown;
The reading of an ever-changing tale;
The light uplifting of a maiden's veil;
A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;
A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,
Riding the springing branches of an elm.

O for ten years, that I may overwhelm
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed
That my own soul has to itself decreed.
Then will I pass the countries that I see
In long perspective, and continually
Taste their pure fountains.⁴ . . .

Having cooled a little from this "fine passion," our youthful poet passes very naturally into a long strain of foaming abuse against a certain class of English poets whom, with Pope at their head, it is much the fashion with the ignorant unsettled pretenders of the present time to undervalue. Begging these gentlemen's pardon, although Pope was not a poet of the same high order with some who are now living, yet to deny his genius is just about as absurd as to dispute that of Wordsworth or to believe in that of Hunt. Above all things it is most pitifully ridiculous to hear men of whom their country will always have reason to be proud, reviled by uneducated and flimsy striplings, who are not capable of understand-

³ A minor poet who, in certain verses, had called Keats "the Muses' son of promise."

⁴ From the poem called "Sleep and Poetry." The reviewer quotes twenty lines more.

ing either their merits or those of any other men of power,—fanciful dreaming tea-drinkers, who, without logic enough to analyze a single idea, or imagination enough to form one original image, or learning enough to distinguish between the written language of Englishmen and the spoken jargon of Cockneys, presume to talk with contempt of some of the most exquisite spirits the world ever produced, merely because they did not happen to exert their faculties in laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots, or cascades heard at Vauxhall;⁵ in short, because they chose to be wits, philosophers, patriots, and poets, rather than to found the Cockney school of versification, morality, and politics, a century before its time. After blaspheming himself into a fury against Boileau, etc.,⁶ Mr. Keats comforts himself and his readers with a view of the present more promising aspect of affairs; above all, with the ripened glories of the poet of *Rimini*. Addressing the manes of the departed chiefs of English poetry, he informs them, in the following clear and touching manner, of the existence of “him of the rose,” etc.

From a thick brake,
Nested and quiet in a valley mild,
Bubbles a pipe; fine sounds are floating wild
About the earth. Happy are ye and glad.

From this he diverges into a view of “things in general.” We smile when we think to ourselves how little most of our readers will understand of what follows.

Yet I rejoice: a myrtle fairer than
E'er grew in Paphos, from the bitter weeds
Lifts its sweet head into the air, and feeds
A silent space with ever sprouting green.
All tenderest birds there find a pleasant screen,
Creep through the shade with jaunty fluttering,
Nibble the little cupped flowers, and sing. . . .

⁵ A pleasure-park near London.

⁶ Referring to the classicists of the eighteenth century, Keats had written

They went about,
Holding a poor, decrepit standard out
Mark'd with most flimsy mottoes, and in large
The name of one Boileau!

Will not some say that I presumptuously
 Have spoken? that from hastening disgrace
 'Twere better far to hide my foolish face?
 That whining boyhood should with reverence bow
 Ere the dreadful thunderbolt could reach? How!
 If I do hide myself, it sure shall be
 In the very fane, the light of poesy.

From some verses addressed to various amiable individuals of the other sex, it appears, notwithstanding all this gossamer-work, that Johnny's affections are not entirely confined to objects purely ethereal. Take, by way of specimen, the following prurient and vulgar lines, evidently meant for some young lady east of Temple Bar.

Add too the sweetness
 Of thy honied voice; the neatness
 Of thine ankle lightly turn'd:
 With those beauties, scarce discern'd,
 Kept with such sweet privacy
 That they seldom meet the eye
 Of the little loves that fly
 Round about with eager pry;
 Saving when, with freshening lave,
 Thou dipp'st them in the taintless wave;
 Like twin water lilies, born
 In the coolness of the morn.
 O, if thou hadst breathed then,
 Now the Muses had been ten.
 Couldst thou wish for lineage *higher*
 Than twin sister of *Thalia*?
 At last for ever, evermore,
 Will I call the Graces four.

Who will dispute that our poet, to use his own phrase (and rhyme),

Can mingle music fit for the soft ear
 Of Lady *Cytherea*?

So much for the opening bud; now for the expanded flower. It is time to pass from the juvenile "Poems" to the mature and elaborate *Endymion, a Poetic Romance*. The old story of the moon falling in love with a shepherd, so prettily told by a Roman classic, and so exquisitely

enlarged and adorned by one of the most elegant of German poets,⁷ has been seized upon by Mr. John Keats, to be done with as might seem good unto the sickly fancy of one who never read a single line either of Ovid or of Wieland. If the quantity, not the quality, of the verses dedicated to the story is to be taken into account, there can be no doubt that Mr. John Keats may now claim *Endymion* entirely to himself. To say the truth, we do not suppose either the Latin or the German poet would be very anxious to dispute about the property of the hero of the "Poetic Romance." Mr. Keats has thoroughly appropriated the character, if not the name. His *Endymion* is not a Greek shepherd, loved by a Grecian goddess; he is merely a young Cockney rhymester, dreaming a fantastic dream at the full of the moon. Costume, were it worth while to notice such a trifle, is violated in every page of this goodly octavo. From his prototype Hunt, John Keats has acquired a sort of vague idea that the Greeks were a most tasteful people, and that no mythology can be so finely adapted for the purposes of poetry as theirs. It is amusing to see what a hand the two Cockneys make of this mythology; the one confesses that he never read the Greek tragedians, and the other knows Homer only from Chapman;⁸ and both of them write about Apollo, Pan, Nymphs, Muses, and Mysteries, as might be expected from persons of their education. We shall not, however, enlarge at present upon this subject, as we mean to dedicate an entire paper to the classical attainments and attempts of the Cockney poets. As for Mr. Keats's *Endymion*, it has just as much to do with Greece as it has with "old Tartary the fierce"; no man, whose mind has ever been imbued with the smallest knowledge or feeling of classical poetry or classical history, could have stooped to profane and vulgarize every association in the manner which has been adopted by this "son of promise." Before giving any extracts, we must inform our readers that this romance is meant to be written in English heroic rhyme. To those who have read any of Hunt's poems, this hint might indeed be needless. Mr.

⁷ In Wieland's *Comische Erzählungen*.

⁸ The Elizabethan translator of Homer; see Keats's sonnet on reading his work.

Keats has adopted the loose, nerveless versification and the Cockney rhymes of the poet of *Rimini*; but in fairness to that gentleman we must add that the defects of the system are tenfold more conspicuous in his disciple's work than in his own. Mr. Hunt is a small poet, but he is a clever man. Mr. Keats is a still smaller poet, and he is only a boy of pretty abilities, which he has done everything in his power to spoil.⁹ . . .

And now, good-morrow to "the Muses' son of Promise";¹⁰ as for "the feats he yet may do," as we do not pretend to say, like himself, "Muse of my native land am I inspired,"¹¹ we shall adhere to the safe old rule of *pauca verba*. We venture to make one small prophecy, that his bookseller will not a second time venture fifty pounds upon anything he can write. It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop, Mr. John, back to "plasters, pills, and ointment boxes," etc. But, for heaven's sake, young Sangrado,¹² be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry.

ON THE TRAGEDIES OF SHAKESPEARE

CONSIDERED WITH REFERENCE TO THEIR FITNESS FOR STAGE REPRESENTATION

CHARLES LAMB

[This early example of Lamb's dramatic criticism appeared in Leigh Hunt's journal, *The Reflector*, in 1812. The paper opens with a passage on Garrick's tomb in Westminster Abbey, and a denial of the right of the actor to a position of honour comparable to that of the dramatist.]

. . . It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of the opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguishing ex-

⁹ In the omitted passage the poem is outlined, with quotations.

¹⁰ See note 3.

¹¹ From *Endymion*, IV, 354.

¹² A quack in LeSage's novel *Gil Blas*.

cellence is a reason that they should be so; there is so much in them which comes not under the province of acting, with which eye and tone and gesture have nothing to do.

The glory of the scenic art is to personate passion, and the turns of passion; and the more coarse and palpable the passion is, the more hold upon the eyes and ears of the spectators the performer obviously possesses. For this reason scolding scenes, scenes where two persons talk themselves into a fit of fury, and then in a surprising manner talk themselves out of it again, have always been the most popular upon our stage. And the reason is plain,—because the spectators are here most palpably appealed to; they are the proper judges in this war of words, they are the legitimate ring that should be formed round such “intellectual prize-fighters.” Talking is the direct object of the imitation here. But in all the best dramas, and in Shakespeare above all, how obvious it is that the form of *speaking*, whether it be in soliloquy or dialogue, is only a medium—and often a highly artificial one—for putting the reader or spectator into possession of that knowledge of the inner structure and workings of mind in a character, which he could otherwise never have arrived at *in that form of composition* by any gift short of intuition. We do here as we do with novels written in the epistolary form. How many improprieties, perfect solecisms in letter-writing, do we put up with in *Clarissa*,¹ and other books, for the sake of the delight which that form upon the whole gives us!

But the practice of stage representation reduces everything to a controversy of elocution. Every character, from the boisterous blasphemings of Bajazet² to the shrinking timidity of womanhood, must play the orator. The love dialogues of Romeo and Juliet, those silver-sweet sounds of lovers' tongues by night; the more intimate and sacred sweetness of nuptial colloquy between an Othello or a Posthumus with their married wives;³ all those delicacies which are so delightful in the reading, as when we read of those youthful dalliances in Paradise—

¹ Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748).

² In Marlowe's tragedy of *Tamburlaine*.

³ See *Othello*, II, 1, 184 ff., and *Cymbeline*, I, 1, 92-123.

As besee'm'd.
Fair couple link'd in happy nuptial league
Alone;⁴

—by the inherent fault of stage representation, how are these things sullied and turned from their very nature by being exposed to a large assembly; when such speeches as Imogen addresses to her lord come drawling out of the mouth of a hired actress, whose courtship, though nominally addressed to the personated Posthumus, is manifestly aimed at the spectators, who are to judge of her endearments and her returns of love!

The character of Hamlet is perhaps that by which, since the days of Betterton,⁵ a succession of popular performers have had the greatest ambition to distinguish themselves. The length of the part may be one of their reasons. But for the character itself, we find it in a play, and therefore we judge it a fit subject of dramatic representation. The play itself abounds in maxims and reflections beyond any other, and therefore we consider it as a proper vehicle for conveying moral instruction. But Hamlet himself—what does he suffer meanwhile by being dragged forth as a public schoolmaster, to give lectures to the crowd! Why, nine parts in ten of what Hamlet does are transactions between himself and his moral sense; they are the effusions of his solitary musings, which he retires to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth; or rather, they are the silent meditations with which his bosom is bursting, reduced to words for the sake of the reader, who must else remain ignorant of what is passing there. These profound sorrows, these light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce dares utter to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulating actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience, making four hundred people his confidants at once? I say not that it is the fault of the actor so to do; he must pronounce them *ore rotundo*; he must accompany them with his eye; he must insinuate them into his auditory by some trick of eye, tone, or gesture,—or

⁴ *Paradise Lost*, iv, 338-40.

⁵ A Shakespearean actor (died 1710).

he fails. He must be thinking all the while of his appearance, because he knows that all the while the spectators are judging of it. And this is the way to represent the shy, negligent, retiring Hamlet!

It is true that there is no other mode of conveying a vast quantity of thought and feeling to a great portion of the audience, who otherwise would never earn it for themselves by reading, and the intellectual acquisition gained this way may, for aught I know, be inestimable; but I am not arguing that *Hamlet* should not be acted, but how much *Hamlet* is made another thing by being acted. I have heard much of the wonders which Garrick performed in this part; but as I never saw him, I must have leave to doubt whether the representation of such a character came within the province of his art. Those who tell me of him speak of his eye, of the magic of his eye, and of his commanding voice,—physical properties, vastly desirable in an actor, and without which he can never insinuate meaning into an auditory,—but what have they to do with Hamlet? what have they to do with intellect? In fact, the things aimed at in theatrical representation are to arrest the spectator's eye upon the form and the gesture, and so to gain a more favorable hearing to what is spoken: it is not what the character is, but how he looks; not what he says, but how he speaks it. I see no reason to think that if the play of *Hamlet* were written over again by some such writer as Banks or Lillo,⁶ retaining the process of the story, but totally omitting all the poetry of it, all the divine features of Shakespeare, his stupendous intellect, and only taking care to give us enough of passionate dialogue, which Banks or Lillo were never at a loss to furnish,—I see not how the effect could be much different upon an audience, nor how the actor has it in his power to represent Shakespeare to us differently from his representation of Banks or Lillo. Hamlet would still be a youthful accomplished prince, and must be gracefully personated; he might be puzzled in his mind, wavering in his conduct, seemingly cruel to Ophelia; he might see a ghost, and start at it, and ad-

⁶ Banks was author of *Virtue Betrayed*, a popular tragedy first produced in 1692; Lillo of *The London Merchant*, or *George Barnwell*, 1731.

dress it kindly when he found it to be his father; all this in the poorest and most homely language of the servilest creeper after nature that ever consulted the palate of an audience, without troubling Shakespeare for the matter: and I see not but there would be room for all the power which an actor has to display itself. All the passions and changes of passion might remain: for those are much less difficult to write or act than is thought; it is a trick easy to be attained, it is but rising or falling a note or two in the voice, a whisper with a significant foreboding look to announce its approach; and so contagious the counterfeit appearance of any emotion is, that, let the words be what they will, the look and tone shall carry it off and make it pass for deep skill in the passions.

It is common for people to talk of Shakespeare's plays being *so natural*; that everybody can understand him. They are natural indeed, they are grounded deep in nature, so deep that the depth of them lies out of the reach of most of us. You shall hear the same persons say that *George Barnwell* is very natural, and *Othello* is very natural, that they are both very deep; and to them they are the same kind of thing. At the one they sit and shed tears, because a good sort of young man is tempted by a naughty woman to commit a trifling peccadillo, the murder of an uncle or so, that is all, and so comes to an untimely end, which is *so moving*; and at the other, because a blackamoor in a fit of jealousy kills his innocent white wife: and the odds are that ninety-nine out of a hundred would willingly behold the same catastrophe happen to both the heroes, and have thought the rope more due to Othello than to Barnwell. For of the texture of Othello's mind, the inward construction marvelously laid open with all its strengths and weaknesses, its heroic confidences and its human misgivings, its agonies of hate springing from the depths of love, they see no more than the spectators at a cheaper rate, who pay their pennies to look through the man's telescope in Leicester Fields, see into the inward plot and topography of the moon. Some dim thing or other they see; they see an actor personating a passion, of grief, or anger, for instance, and they recognize it as a copy of the usual external effects of such passions, or at least as being true to *that symbol*

of the emotion which passes current at the theater for it, for it is often no more than that; but of the grounds of the passion, its correspondence to a great or heroic nature, which is the only worthy object of tragedy,—that common auditors know anything of this, or can have any such notions dinned into them by the mere strength of an actor's lungs,—that apprehensions foreign to them should be thus infused into them by storm, I can neither believe, nor understand how it can be possible.

We talk of Shakespeare's admirable observation of life, when we should feel that, not from a petty inquisition into those cheap and every-day characters which surrounded him, as they surround us, but from his own mind, which was—to borrow a phrase of Ben Jonson's—the very "sphere of humanity,"⁷ he fetched those images of virtue and of knowledge, of which every one of us, recognizing a part, think we comprehend in our natures the whole; and oftentimes mistake the powers which he positively creates in us for nothing more than indigenous faculties of our own minds, which only waited the application of corresponding virtues in him to return a full and clear echo of the same.

To return to Hamlet. Among the distinguishing features of that wonderful character, one of the most interesting (yet painful) is that soreness of mind which makes him treat the intrusions of Polonius with harshness, and that asperity which he puts on in his interviews with Ophelia. These tokens of an unhinged mind (if they be not mixed in the latter case with a profound artifice of love, to alienate Ophelia by affected discourtesies, so to prepare her mind for the breaking off of that loving intercourse which can no longer find a place amidst business so serious as that which he has to do) are parts of his character, which to reconcile with our admiration of Hamlet, the most patient consideration of his situation is no more than necessary; they are what we forgive afterwards, and explain by the whole of his character, but at the time they are harsh and unpleasant. Yet such is the actor's necessity of giving strong blows to the audience, that I have never seen a player in this character who

⁷ See the "Pindaric Ode on the Death of Sir H. Morison."

did not exaggerate and strain to the utmost these ambiguous features,—these temporary deformities in the character. They make him express a vulgar scorn at Polonius which utterly degrades his gentility, and which no explanation can render palatable; they make him show contempt and curl up the nose at Ophelia's father,—contempt in its very grossest and most hateful form; but they get applause by it,—it is natural, people say; that is, the words are scornful, and the actor expresses scorn, and that they can judge of; but why so much scorn, and of that sort, they never think of asking.

So to Ophelia. All the Hamlets that I have ever seen rant and rave at her as if she had committed some great crime, and the audience are highly pleased, because the words of the part are satirical, and they are enforced by the strongest expression of satirical indignation of which the face and voice are capable. But then, whether Hamlet is likely to have put on such brutal appearances to a lady whom he loved so dearly, is never thought on. The truth is that in all such deep affections as had subsisted between Hamlet and Ophelia, there is a stock of *supererogatory love* (if I may venture to use the expression), which in any great grief of heart, especially where that which preys upon the mind cannot be communicated, confers a kind of indulgence upon the grieved party to express itself, even to its heart's dearest object, in the language of a temporary alienation; but it is not alienation,—it is a distraction purely, and so it always makes itself to be felt by that object; it is not anger, but grief assuming the appearance of anger,—love awkwardly counterfeiting hate, as sweet countenances when they try to frown; but such sternness and fierce disgust as Hamlet is made to show is no counterfeit, but the real face of absolute aversion—of irreconcilable alienation. It may be said he puts on the madman; but then he should only so far put on this counterfeit lunacy as his own real distraction will give him leave,—that is, incompletely, imperfectly, not in that confirmed, practiced way, like a master of his art, or as Dame Quickly would say, “like one of those harlotry players.”⁸

⁸ 1 *Henry IV*, II, iv, 437.

I mean no disrespect to any actor, but the sort of pleasure which Shakespeare's plays give in the acting seems to me not at all to differ from that which the audience receive from those of other writers, and, they being in themselves essentially so different from all others, I must conclude that there is something in the nature of acting which levels all distinctions. And in fact, who does not speak indifferently of *The Gamester*⁹ and of *Macbeth* as fine stage performances, and praise the Mrs. Beverley¹⁰ in the same way as the Lady Macbeth of Mrs. Siddons? Belvidera, and Calista, and Isabella, and Euphrasia,¹¹ are they less liked than Imogen, or than Juliet, or than Desdemona? Are they not spoken of and remembered in the same way? Is not the female performer as great (as they call it) in one as in the other? Did not Garrick shine, and was he not ambitious of shining, in every drawling tragedy that his wretched day produced,—the productions of the Hills and the Murphys and the Brownis,¹²—and shall he have that honor to dwell in our minds forever as an inseparable concomitant with Shakespeare? A kindred mind! Oh who can read that affecting sonnet of Shakespeare which alludes to his profession as a player,—

Oh for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public custom breeds—
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand;
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand—¹³

or that other confession,—

Alas! 'tis true, I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gor'd mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear—¹⁴

⁹ A domestic tragedy by Edward Moore (1753).

¹⁰ The heroine of *The Gamester*.

¹¹ Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserved*; Calista in Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*; Isabella in Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*; Euphrasia in Murphy's *The Grecian Daughter*.

¹² Aaron Hill (1685-1750), Arthur Murphy (1727-1805), and John Brown (1715-1766), minor but successful dramatists.

¹³ Sonnet 111.

¹⁴ Sonnet 110.

who can read these instances of jealous self-watchfulness in our sweet Shakespeare, and dream of any congeniality between him and one that, by every tradition of him, appears to have been as mere a player as ever existed; to have had his mind tainted with the lowest players' vices,—envy and jealousy, and miserable cravings after applause; one who in the exercise of his profession was jealous even of the women performers that stood in his way; a manager full of managerial tricks and stratagems and finesse: that any resemblance should be dreamed of between him and Shakespeare,—Shakespeare who, in the plenitude and consciousness of his own powers, could, with that noble modesty which we can neither imitate nor appreciate, express himself thus of his own sense of his own defects:

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess;
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope.¹⁵

I am almost disposed to deny to Garrick the merit of being an admirer of Shakespeare. A true lover of his excellences he certainly was not; for would any true lover of them have admitted into his matchless scenes such ribald trash as Tate and Cibber,¹⁶ and the rest of them, that

With their darkness durst affront his light,

have foisted into the acting plays of Shakespeare? I believe it impossible that he could have had a proper reverence for Shakespeare, and have condescended to go through that interpolated scene in *Richard the Third*, in which Richard tries to break his wife's heart by telling her he loves another woman, and says, "if she survive this she is immortal." Yet I doubt not he delivered this vulgar stuff with as much anxiety of emphasis as any of the genuine parts; and for acting it is as well calculated as any. But we have seen the part of Richard lately produce great fame to an actor by his manner of play-

¹⁵ Sonnet 29.

¹⁶ Dramatists who, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, rewrote plays of Shakespeare's. Tate's version of *King Lear*, and Cibber's of *Richard III*, held the stage well into the 19th century.

ing it, and it lets us into the secret of acting, and of popular judgments of Shakespeare derived from acting. Not one of the spectators who have witnessed Mr. C[ooke]'s ¹⁷ exertions in that part but has come away with a proper conviction that Richard is a very wicked man, and kills little children in their beds, with something like the pleasure which the giants and ogres in children's books are represented to have taken in that practice; moreover, that he is very close and shrewd, and devilish cunning, for you could see that by his eye. But is, in fact, this the impression we have in reading the Richard of Shakespeare? Do we feel anything like disgust, as we do at that butcher-like representation of him that passes for him on the stage? A horror at his crimes blends with the effect that we feel; but how is it qualified, how is it carried off, by the rich intellect which he displays,—his resources, his wit, his buoyant spirits, his vast knowledge and insight into characters, the poetry of his part,—not an atom of all which is made perceivable in Mr. C[ooke]'s way of acting it. Nothing but his crimes, his actions, is visible; they are prominent and staring. The murderer stands out; but where is the lofty genius, the man of vast capacity,—the profound, the witty, accomplished Richard?

The truth is, the characters of Shakespeare are so much the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions, that while we are reading any of his great criminal characters—Macbeth, Richard, even Iago—we think not so much of the crimes which they commit as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap these moral fences. Barnwell ¹⁸ is a wretched murderer; there is a certain fitness between his neck and the rope; he is the legitimate heir to the gallows; nobody who thinks at all can think of any alleviating circumstances in his case to make him a fit object of mercy. Or, to take an instance from the higher tragedy, what else but a mere assassin is Glenalvon! ¹⁹ Do we think of anything but of the crime which he commits, and the rack which he deserves? That

¹⁷ George Frederick Cooke (1756-1811).

¹⁸ See note 6.

¹⁹ In Home's tragedy of *Douglas*.

is all which we really think about him. Whereas in corresponding characters in Shakespeare so little do the actions comparatively affect us, that while the impulses, the inner mind in all its perverted greatness, solely seems real and is exclusively attended to, the crime is comparatively nothing. But when we see these things represented, the acts which they do are comparatively everything, their impulses nothing. The state of sublime emotion into which we are elevated by those images of night and horror which Macbeth is made to utter, that solemn prelude with which he entertains the time till the bell shall strike which is to call him to murder Duncan,—when we no longer read it in a book, when we have given up that vantage-ground of abstraction which reading possesses over seeing, and come to see a man in his bodily shape before our eyes actually preparing to commit a murder, if the acting be true and impressive, as I have witnessed it in Mr. K[emble's] performance of that part, the painful anxiety about the act, the natural longing to prevent it while it yet seems unperpetrated, the too close-pressing semblance of reality, give a pain and an uneasiness which totally destroy all the delight which the words in the book convey, where the deed doing never presses upon us with the painful sense of presence: it rather seems to belong to history,—to something past and inevitable, if it has anything to do with time at all. The sublime images, the poetry alone, is that which is present to our minds in the reading.

So to see Lear acted,—to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting. We want to take him into shelter and relieve him. That is all the feeling which the acting of Lear ever produced in me. But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear: they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage, or one of Michael Angelo's terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual; the explosions of his passion are

terrible as a volcano; they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on,—even as he himself neglects it. On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear: we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms. In the aberrations of his reason we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind blows where it listeth, at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind. What have looks, or tones, to do with that sublime identification of his age with that of the heavens themselves, when, in his reproaches to them for conniving at the injustice of his children, he reminds them that “they themselves are old”? What gesture shall we appropriate to this? What has the voice or the eye to do with such things? But the play is beyond all art, as the tamperings with it show; it is too hard and stony; it must have love-scenes, and a happy ending. It is not enough that Cordelia is a daughter: she must shine as a lover too. Tate has put his hook in the nostrils of this leviathan, for Garrick and his followers, the showmen of the scene, to draw the mighty beast about more easily. A happy ending!—as if the living martyrdom that Lear had gone through, the flaying of his feelings alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage of life the only decorous thing for him. If he is to live and be happy after, if he could sustain this world’s burden after, why all this pudder and preparation,—why torment us with all this unnecessary sympathy? As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his misused station!—as if, at his years and with his experience, anything was left but to die!

Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage. But how many dramatic personages are there in Shakespeare which, though more tractable and feasible (if I may so speak) than Lear, yet from some circumstance, some adjunct to their character, are improper to

be shown to our bodily eye! Othello, for instance. Nothing can be more soothing, more flattering to the nobler parts of our natures, than to read of a young Venetian lady of highest extraction, through the force of love and from a sense of merit in him whom she loved, laying aside every consideration of kindred and country and color, and wedding with a "coal-black Moor" (for such he is represented, in the imperfect state of knowledge respecting foreign countries in those days, compared with our own, or in compliance with popular notions, though the Moors are now well enough known to be by many shades less unworthy of a white woman's fancy);—it is the perfect triumph of virtue over accidents, of the imagination over the senses. She sees Othello's color in his mind.²⁰ But upon the stage, when the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty, but we are left to our poor unassisted senses, I appeal to every one that has seen Othello played, whether he did not, on the contrary, sink Othello's mind in his color,—whether he did not find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona, and whether the actual sight of the thing did not overweigh all that beautiful compromise which we make in reading. And the reason it should do so is obvious,—because there is just so much reality presented to our senses as to give a perception of disagreement, with not enough of belief in the internal motives—all that which is unseen—to overpower and reconcile the first and obvious prejudices.²¹ What we see upon a stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind and its movements; and this I think may sufficiently account for the very different sort of delight with which the same play so often affects us in the reading and the seeing.

²⁰ See *Othello*, I, iii, 253.

²¹ The error of supposing that, because Othello's color does not offend us in the reading, it should also not offend us in the seeing, is just such a fallacy as supposing that an Adam and Eve in a picture shall affect us just as they do in the poem. But in the poem we for a while have Paradisaical senses given us, which vanish when we see a man and his wife without clothes in the picture. The painters themselves feel this, as is apparent by the awkward shifts they have recourse to, to make them look not quite naked,—by a sort of prophetic anachronism antedating the invention of fig-leaves. So in the reading of the play we see with Desdemona's eyes; in the seeing of it we are forced to look with our own. [Lamb's note.]

It requires little reflection to perceive that, if those characters in Shakespeare which are within the precincts of nature have yet something in them which appeals too exclusively to the imagination to admit of their being made objects to the senses without suffering a change and a diminution,—that still stronger the objection must lie against representing another line of characters, which Shakespeare has introduced to give a wildness and a supernatural elevation to his scenes, as if to remove them still farther from that assimilation to common life in which their excellence is vulgarly supposed to consist. When we read the incantations of those terrible beings, the Witches in *Macbeth*, though some of the ingredients of their hellish composition savor of the grotesque, yet is the effect upon us other than the most serious and appalling that can be imagined? Do we not feel spell-bound as Macbeth was? Can any mirth accompany a sense of their presence? We might as well laugh under a consciousness of the principle of Evil himself being truly and really present with us. But attempt to bring these beings on to a stage, and you turn them instantly into so many old women, that men and children are to laugh at. Contrary to the old saying that “seeing is believing,” the sight actually destroys the faith; and the mirth in which we indulge at their expense, when we see these creatures upon a stage, seems to be a sort of indemnification which we make to ourselves for the terror which they put us in when reading made them an object of belief,—when we surrendered up our reason to the poet, as children to their nurses and their elders; and we laugh at our fears, as children who thought they saw something in the dark triumph when the bringing in of a candle discovers the vanity of their fears. For this exposure of supernatural agents upon a stage is truly bringing in a candle to expose their own delusiveness. It is the solitary taper and the book that generates a faith in these terrors: a ghost by chandelier light, and in good company, deceives no spectators,—a ghost that can be measured by the eye, and his human dimensions made out at leisure. The sight of a well-lighted house, and a well-dressed audience, shall arm the most nervous child against any apprehensions: as Tom Brown says of the impenetrable skin

of Achilles with his impenetrable armor over it, "Bully Dawson would have fought the devil with such advantages."

Much has been said, and deservedly, in reprobation of the vile mixture which Dryden has thrown into *The Tempest*; ²² doubtless without some such vicious alloy, the impure ears of that age would never have sat out to hear so much innocence of love as is contained in the sweet courtship of Ferdinand and Miranda. But is *The Tempest* of Shakespeare at all a fit subject for stage representation? It is one thing to read of an enchanter, and to believe the wondrous tale while we are reading it; but to have a conjurer brought before us in his conjuring-gown, with his spirits about him, which none but himself and some hundred of favored spectators before the curtain are supposed to see, involves such a quantity of the *hateful incredible* that all our reverence for the author cannot hinder us from perceiving such gross attempts upon the senses to be in the highest degree childish and inefficient. Spirits and fairies cannot be represented; they cannot even be painted; they can only be believed. But the elaborate and anxious provision of scenery, which the luxury of the age demands, in these cases works a quite contrary effect to what is intended. That which in comedy, or plays of familiar life, adds so much to the life of the imitation, in plays which appeal to the higher faculties positively destroys the illusion which it is introduced to aid. A parlor or a drawing-room—a library opening into a garden—a garden with an alcove in it—a street, or the piazza of Covent Garden, does well enough in a scene; we are content to give as much credit to it as it demands, or rather, we think little about it,—it is little more than reading at the top of a page, "Scene, a garden"; we do not imagine ourselves there, but we readily admit the imitation of familiar objects. But to think by the help of painted trees and caverns, which we know to be painted, to transport our minds to Prospero and his island and his lonely cell, ²³ or by the aid of a fiddle dex-

²² An alteration of Shakespeare's play, made by Dryden and Davenant in 1667.

²³ It will be said these things are done in pictures. But pictures and scenes are very different things. Painting is a world of itself,

terously thrown in, in the interval of speaking, to make us believe that we hear those supernatural noises of which the isle was full,—the Orrery Lecturer at the Haymarket might as well hope, by his musical glasses cleverly stationed out of sight behind his apparatus, to make us believe that we do indeed hear the crystal spheres ring out that chime which, if it were to enwrap our fancy long, Milton thinks,

Time would run back and fetch the age of gold,
And speckled Vanity
Would sicken soon and die,
And leprous sin would melt from earthly mould;
Yea, Hell itself would pass away,
And leave its dolorous mansions to the peering day.

The garden of Eden, with our first parents in it, is not more impossible to be shown on a stage than the Enchanted Isle, with its no less interesting and innocent first settlers.

The subject of scenery is closely connected with that of the dresses, which are so anxiously attended to on our stage. I remember the last time I saw *Macbeth* played, the discrepancy I felt at the changes of garment which he varied, the shiftings and reshiftings, like a Romish priest at mass. The luxury of stage improvements, and the importunity of the public eye, require this. The coronation robe of the Scottish monarch was fairly a counterpart to that which our King wears when he goes to the Parliament House, just so full and cumbersome, and set out with ermine and pearls. And if things must be represented, I see not what to find fault with in this. But in reading, what robe are we conscious of? Some dim images of royalty—a crown and sceptre—may float before our eyes; but who shall describe the fashion of it? Do we see in our mind's eye what Webb or any other robe-maker could pattern? This is the inevitable consequence of imitating everything, to make all things natural. Whereas the reading of a tragedy is a fine abstraction. It presents to the fancy just so much of external appear-

~~but in scene-painting there is the attempt to deceive; and there is the discordancy, never to be got over, between painted scenes and real people.~~ [Lamb's note.]

ances as to make us feel that we are among flesh and blood, while by far the greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of the character. But in acting, scenery, dress, the most contemptible things, call upon us to judge of their naturalness.

Perhaps it would be no bad similitude to liken the pleasure which we take in seeing one of these fine plays acted, compared with that quiet delight which we find in the reading of it, to the different feelings with which a reviewer and a man that is not a reviewer reads a fine poem. The accursed critical habit,—the being called upon to judge and pronounce, must make it quite a different thing to the former. In seeing these plays acted, we are affected just as judges. When Hamlet compares the two pictures of Gertrude's first and second husband,²⁴ who wants to see the picture? But in the acting, a miniature must be lugged out, which we know not to be the picture, but only to show how finely a miniature may be represented. This showing of everything levels all things: it makes tricks, bows, and curtesies of importance. Mrs. S[iddons] never got more fame by anything than by the manner in which she dismisses the guests in the banquet scene in *Macbeth*: it is as much remembered as any of her thrilling tones or impressive looks. But does such a trifle as this enter into the imaginations of the readers of that wild and wonderful scene? Does not the mind dismiss the feasters as rapidly as it can? Does it care about the gracefulness of the doing it? But by acting, and judging of acting, all these non-essentials are raised into an importance injurious to the main interest of the play.

I have confined my observations to the tragic parts of Shakespeare. It would be no very difficult task to extend the inquiry to his comedies, and to show why Falstaff, Shallow, Sir Hugh Evans, and the rest, are equally incompatible with stage representation. The length to which this essay has run will make it, I am afraid, sufficiently distasteful to the amateurs of the theater, without going any deeper into the subject at present.

²⁴ *Hamlet*, III, iv, 53.

IAGO AND MALVOLIO

CHARLES LAMB

[From the essay "On Some of the Old Actors," originally published in the *London Magazine* for February, 1822.]

Of all the actors who flourished in my time—a melancholy phrase if taken aright, reader—Bensley had most of the swell of soul, was greatest in the delivery of heroic conceptions, the emotions consequent upon the presentation of a great idea to the fancy. He had the true poetical enthusiasm—the rarest faculty among players. None that I remember possessed even a portion of that fine madness which he threw out in Hotspur's famous rant about glory,¹ or the transports of the Venetian incendiary² at the vision of the fired city. His voice had the dissonance and at times the inspiring effect of the trumpet. His gait was uncouth and stiff, but no way embarrassed by affectation; and the thoroughbred gentleman was uppermost in every movement. He seized the moment of passion with the greatest truth; like a faithful clock, never striking before the time; never anticipating, or leading you to anticipate. He was totally destitute of trick and artifice. He seemed come upon the stage to do the poet's message simply, and he did it with as genuine fidelity as the nuncios in Homer deliver the errands of the gods. He let the passion or the sentiment do its own work without prop or bolstering. He would have scorned to mountebank it, and betrayed none of that *cleverness* which is the bane of serious acting. For this reason, his Iago was the only endurable one which I remember to have seen. No spectator from his action could divine more of his artifice than Othello was supposed to do. His confessions in soliloquy alone put you in possession of the mystery. There were no by-intimations to make the audience fancy their own discernment so much greater than that of the Moor—who

¹ *Henry IV*, I, iii, 201-07.

² Pierre, in Otway's *Venice Preserved*, II, iii.

commonly stands like a great helpless mark set up for mine Ancient, and a quantity of barren spectators, to shoot their bolts at. The Iago of Bensley did not go to work so grossly. There was a triumphant tone about the character, natural to a general consciousness of power; but none of that petty vanity which chuckles and cannot contain itself upon any little successful stroke of its knavery—as is common with your small villains and green probationers in mischief. It did not clap or crow before its time. It was not a man setting his wits at a child, and winking all the while at other children who are mightily pleased at being let into the secret, but a consummate villain entrapping a noble nature into toils, against which no discernment was available, where the manner was as fathomless as the purpose seemed dark and without motive.

The part of Malvolio, in the *Twelfth Night*, was performed by Bensley with a richness and a dignity of which (to judge from some recent castings of that character) the very tradition must be worn out from the stage. No manager in those days would have dreamed of giving it to Mr. Baddeley or Mr. Parsons:³ when Bensley was occasionally absent from the theater, John Kemble thought it no derogation to succeed in the part. Malvolio is not essentially ludicrous. He becomes comic but by accident. He is cold, austere, repelling; but dignified, consistent, and, for what appears, rather of an over-stretched morality. Maria describes him as a sort of Puritan; and he might have worn his gold chain with honor in one of our old Roundhead families, in the service of a Lambert or a Lady Fairfax. But his morality and his manners are misplaced in Illyria. He is opposed to the proper *levities* of the piece, and falls in the unequal contest. Still his pride, or his gravity (call it which you will), is inherent and native to the man, not mock or affected, which latter only are the fit objects to excite laughter. His quality is at the best unlovely, but neither buffoon nor contemptible. His bearing is lofty, a little above his station, but probably not much above his deserts. We see no reason why he should not have been brave, honorable, accomplished. His careless com-

³ Robert Baddeley (1733-1794) and William Parsons (1736-1795).

mittal of the ring to the ground * (which he was commissioned to restore to Cesario) bespeaks a generosity of birth and feeling. His dialect on all occasions is that of a gentleman and a man of education. We must not confound him with the eternal old, low steward of comedy. He is master of the household to a great princess, a dignity probably conferred upon him for other respects than age or length of service. Olivia, at the first indication of his supposed madness, declares that she "would not have him miscarry for half of her dowry." ⁵ Does this look as if the character was meant to appear little or insignificant? Once, indeed, she accuses him to his face—of what?—of being "sick of self-love,"—but with a gentleness and considerateness which could not have been, if she had not thought that this particular infirmity shaded some virtues. His rebuke to the knight and his sottish revelers ⁶ is sensible and spirited; and when we take into consideration the unprotected condition of his mistress, and the strict regard with which her state of real or dissembled mourning would draw the eyes of the world upon her house-affairs, Malvolio might feel the honor of the family in some sort in his keeping; as it appears not that Olivia had any more brothers, or kinsmen, to look to it—for Sir Toby had dropped all such nice respects at the buttery hatch. That Malvolio was meant to be represented as possessing estimable qualities, the expression of the Duke, in his anxiety to have him reconciled, almost infers. "Pursue him, and entreat him to a peace." ⁷ Even in his abused state of chains and darkness, a sort of greatness seems never to desert him. He argues highly and well with the supposed Sir Topas, and philosophizes gallantly upon his straw. ⁸ There must have been some shadow of worth about the man; he must have been some-

* II, i, 15.

⁵ III, iv, 70.

⁶ II, iii, 93-108.

⁷ V, i, 389.

⁸ *Clown.* What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild fowl?

Mal. That the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird.

Clown. What thinkest thou of his opinion?

Mal. I think nobly of the soul, and no way approve of his opinion.

[IV, ii, 54-60. Quoted by Lamb.]

thing more than a mere vapor—a thing of straw, or Jack in office—before Fabian and Maria could have ventured sending him upon a courting errand to Olivia. There was some consonancy (as he would say) in the undertaking, or the jest would have been too bold even for that house of misrule.

Bensley, accordingly, threw over the part an air of Spanish loftiness. He looked, spake, and moved like an old Castilian. He was starch, spruce, opinionated, but his superstructure of pride seemed bottomed upon a sense of worth. There was something in it beyond the coxcomb. It was big and swelling, but you could not be sure that it was hollow. You might wish to see it taken down, but you felt that it was upon an elevation. He was magnificent from the outset; but when the decent sobrieties of the character began to give way, and the poison of self-love, in his conceit of the Countess's affection, gradually to work, you would have thought that the hero of *La Mancha*⁹ in person stood before you. How he went smiling to himself! with what ineffable carelessness would he twirl his gold chain! what a dream it was! You were infected with the illusion, and did not wish that it should be removed! You had no room for laughter! If an unseasonable reflection of morality obtruded itself, it was a deep sense of the pitiable infirmity of man's nature, that can lay him open to such frenzies—but in truth you rather admired than pitied the lunacy while it lasted—you felt that an hour of such a mistake was worth an age with the eyes open. Who would not wish to live but for a day in the conceit of such a lady's love as Olivia? Why, the Duke would have given his principality but for a quarter of a minute, sleeping or waking, to have been so deluded. The man seemed to tread upon air, to taste manna, to walk with his head in the clouds, to mate Hyperion. O! shake not the castles of his pride—endure yet for a season bright moments of confidence—"stand still, ye watches of the element," that Malvolio may be still in fancy fair Olivia's lord;—but fate and retribution say no—I hear the mischievous titter of Maria—the witty taunts of Sir Toby—the still more insup-

⁹ Don Quixote.

portable triumph of the foolish knight—the counterfeit Sir Topas is unmasked—and “thus the whirligig of time,” as the true clown hath it, “brings in his revenges.”¹⁰ I confess that I never saw the catastrophe of this character, while Bensley played it, without a kind of tragic interest.

ON THE ARTIFICIAL COMEDY OF THE LAST CENTURY

CHARLES LAMB

[Originally published in the *London Magazine* for April, 1822, as the second of three essays on “The Old Actors.” See Macaulay’s reply to Lamb’s defence of Restoration comedy, page 359.]

The artificial Comedy, or Comedy of Manners, is quite extinct on our stage. Congreve and Farquhar show their heads once in seven years only, to be exploded and put down instantly. The times cannot bear them. Is it for a few wild speeches, an occasional license of dialogue? I think not altogether. The business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test. We screw everything up to that. Idle gallantry in a fiction, a dream, the passing pageant of an evening, startles us in the same way as the alarming indications of profligacy in a son or ward in real life should startle a parent or guardian. We have no such middle emotions as dramatic interests left. We see a stage libertine playing his loose pranks of two hours’ duration, and of no after consequence, with the severe eyes which inspect real vices with their bearings upon two worlds. We are spectators to a plot or intrigue (not reducible in life to the point of strict morality) and take it all for truth. We substitute a real for a dramatic person, and judge him accordingly. We try him in our courts, from which there is no appeal to the *dramatis personæ*, his peers. We have been spoiled with—not sentimental comedy—but a tyrant far more

¹⁰ V, 1, 385.

pernicious to our pleasures which has succeeded to it, the exclusive and all-devouring drama of common life; where the moral point is everything; where, instead of the fictitious half-believed personages of the stage (the phantoms of old comedy), we recognize ourselves, our brothers, aunts, kinsfolk, allies, patrons, enemies,—the same as in life,—with an interest in what is going on so hearty and substantial, that we cannot afford our moral judgment, in its deepest and most vital results, to compromise or slumber for a moment. What is *there* transacting, by no modification is made to affect us in any other manner than the same events or characters would do in our relationships of life. We carry our fireside concerns to the theater with us. We do not go thither, like our ancestors, to escape from the pressure of reality, so much as to confirm our experience of it; to make assurance double, and take a bond of fate. We must live our toilsome lives twice over, as it was the mournful privilege of Ulysses to descend twice to the shades. All that neutral ground of character, which stood between vice and virtue; or which in fact was indifferent to neither, where neither properly was called in question; that happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning—the sanctuary and quiet Alsatia¹ of hunted casuistry—is broken up and disfranchised, as injurious to the interests of society. The privileges of the place are taken away by law. We dare not dally with images, or names, of wrong. We bark like foolish dogs at shadows. We dread infection from the scenic representation of disorder, and fear a painted pustule. In our anxiety that our morality should not take cold, we wrap it up in a great blanket surtout of precaution against the breeze and sunshine.

I confess for myself that (with no great delinquencies to answer for) I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience,—not to live always in the precincts of the law-courts—but now and then, for a dream-while or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions—to get into recesses whither the hunter cannot follow me—

¹A district in the precinct of Whitefriars which, until 1697, was a legal sanctuary for debtors.

—Secret shades
Of woody Ida's inmost grove,
While yet there was no fear of Jove—²

I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it. I wear my shackles more contentedly for having respired the breath of an imaginary freedom. I do not know how it is with others, but I feel the better always for the perusal of one of Congreve's—nay, why should I not add even of Wycherley's—comedies. I am the gayer at least for it; and I could never connect those sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them to imitation in real life. They are a world of themselves almost as much as fairyland. Take one of their characters, male or female (with few exceptions they are alike), and place it in a modern play, and my virtuous indignation shall rise against the profligate wretch as warmly as the Catos of the pit could desire; because in a modern play I am to judge of the right and the wrong. The standard of *police* is the measure of *political justice*. The atmosphere will blight it, it cannot live here. It has got into a moral world, where it has no business, from which it must needs fall headlong; as dizzy, and incapable of making a stand, as a Swedenborgian bad spirit that has wandered un-awares into the sphere of one of his Good Men or Angels. But in its own world, do we feel the creature is so very bad?—The Fainalls and the Mirabels, the Dorimants and the Lady Touchwoods,³ in their own sphere, do not offend my moral sense; in fact they do not appeal to it at all. They seem engaged in their proper element. They break through no laws, or conscious restraints. They know of none. They have got out of Christendom into the land—what shall I call it?—of cuckoldry—the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom. It is altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is. No good person can be justly offended as a spectator, be-

² From Milton's "Il Penseroso," lines 28-30.

³ Fainall and Mirabel are characters in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (there are also two Mirabels in Farquhar's *The Inconstant*); Dorimant in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, Lady Touchwood in Congreve's *The Double Dealer*.

cause no good person suffers on the stage. Judged morally, every character in these plays—the few exceptions only are *mistakes*—is alike essentially vain and worthless. The great art of Congreve is especially shown in this, that he has entirely excluded from his scenes—some little generousities on the part of Angelica⁴ perhaps excepted—not only any thing like a faultless character, but any pretensions to goodness or good feelings whatsoever. Whether he did this designedly, or instinctively, the effect is as happy as the design (if design) was bold. I used to wonder at the strange power which his *Way of the World* in particular possesses of interesting you all along in the pursuits of characters for whom you absolutely care nothing—for you neither hate nor love his personages—and I think it is owing to this very indifference for any, that you endure the whole. He has spread a privation of moral light, I will call it, rather than by the ugly name of palpable darkness, over his creations; and his shadows flit before you without distinction or preference. Had he introduced a good character, a single gush of moral feeling, revulsion of the judgment to actual life and actual duties, the impertinent Goshen would have only lighted to the discovery of deformities, which now are none, because we think them none.

Translated into real life, the characters of his—and his friend Wycherley's—dramas are profligates and strumpets,—the business of their brief existence the undivided pursuit of lawless gallantry. No other spring of action, or possible motive of conduct, is recognized; principles which, universally acted upon, must reduce this frame of things to a chaos. But we do them wrong in so translating them. No such effects are produced in *their* world. When we are among them, we are amongst a chaotic people. We are not to judge them by our usages. No reverend institutions are insulted by their proceedings,—for they have none among them. No peace of families is violated,—for no family ties exist among them. No purity of the marriage bed is stained,—for none is supposed to have a being. No deep affections are disquieted,—no holy wedlock bands are snapped asunder,—

⁴ In *Love for Love*.

for affection's depth and wedded faith are not of the growth of that soil. There is neither right nor wrong, —gratitude or its opposite,—claim or duty,—paternity or sonship. Of what consequence is it to virtue, or how is she at all concerned about it, whether Sir Simon, or Dapperwit, steal away Miss Martha; or who is the father of Lord Froth's or Sir Paul Pliant's children?⁵

The whole is a passing pageant, where we should sit as unconcerned at the issues, for life or death, as at a battle of the frogs and mice. But, like Don Quixote, we take part against the puppets, and quite as impertinently. We dare not contemplate an Atlantis,⁶ a scheme, out of which our coxcombical moral sense is for a little transitory ease excluded. We have not the courage to imagine a state of things for which there is neither reward nor punishment. We cling to the painful necessities of shame and blame. We would indict our very dreams.⁷ . . .

THE SANITY OF TRUE GENIUS

CHARLES LAMB

[First published in the *New Monthly Magazine* for May, 1826, as one of a series of accounts of "Popular Fallacies."]

So far from the position holding true, that great wit (or genius, in our modern way of speaking) has a necessary alliance with insanity, the greatest wits, on the contrary, will ever be found to be the sanest writers. It is impossible for the mind to conceive a mad Shakespeare. The greatness of wit, by which the poetic talent is here chiefly to be understood, manifests itself in the admirable balance of all the faculties. Madness is the disproportionate straining or excess of any one of them. "So strong a wit," says Cowley, speaking of a poetical friend,

" did Nature to him frame,
As all things but his judgment overcame;

⁵ In Wycherley's *Love in a Wood*.

⁶ Ideal commonwealth (from Bacon).

⁷ The remainder of the essay celebrates some of the actors associated with the old comedy.

His judgment like the heavenly moon did show,
Tempering that mighty sea below."¹

The ground of the mistake is, that men, finding in the raptures of the higher poetry a condition of exaltation, to which they have no parallel in their own experience, besides the spurious resemblance of it in dreams and fevers, impute a state of dreaminess and fever to the poet. But the true poet dreams being awake. He is not possessed by his subject, but has dominion over it. In the groves of Eden he walks familiar as in his native paths. He ascends the empyrean heaven, and is not intoxicated. He treads the burning marl without dismay; he wins his flight without self-loss through realms of chaos "and old night." Or, if abandoning himself to that severer chaos of a "human mind untuned," he is content awhile to be mad with Lear, or to hate mankind (a sort of madness) with Timon, neither is that madness, nor this misanthropy, so unchecked, but that—never letting the reins of reason wholly go, while most he seems to do so—he has his better genius still whispering at his ear, with the good servant Kent suggesting saner counsels, or with the honest steward Flavius recommending kindlier resolutions.² Where he seems most to recede from humanity, he will be found the truest to it. From beyond the scope of Nature if he summon possible existences, he subjugates them to the law of her consistency. He is beautifully loyal to that sovereign directress, even when he appears most to betray and desert her. His ideal tribes submit to policy; his very monsters are tamed to his hand, even as that wild sea-brood, shepherded by Proteus. He tames and he clothes them with attributes of flesh and blood, till they wonder at themselves, like Indian Islanders forced to submit to European vesture. Caliban, the Witches, are as true to the laws of their own nature (ours with a difference), as Othello, Hamlet, and Macbeth. Herein the great and the little wits are differenced,—that if the latter wander ever so little from nature or actual existence, they lose

¹ From the elegy "On the Death of Mr. William Harvey."

² See *King Lear*, I, i, 141-68, and *Timon of Athens*, IV, iii, 486-541.

themselves, and their readers. Their phantoms are lawless; their visions nightmares. They do not create, which implies shaping and consistency. Their imaginations are not active—for to be active is to call something into act and form—but passive, as men in sick dreams. For the super-natural, or something super-added to what we know of nature, they give you the plainly non-natural. And if this were all, and that these mental hallucinations were discoverable only in the treatment of subjects out of nature, or transcending it, the judgment might with some plea be pardoned if it ran riot, and a little wantonized: but even in the describing of real and everyday life, that which is before their eyes, one of these lesser wits shall more deviate from nature—show more of that inconsequence which has a natural alliance with frenzy—than a great genius in his “maddest fits,” as Wither somewhere calls them. We appeal to any one that is acquainted with the common run of Lane’s novels,³—as they existed some twenty or thirty years back,—those scanty intellectual viands of the whole female reading public, till a happier genius arose, and expelled for ever the innutritious phantoms,—whether he has not found his brain more “betossed,” his memory more puzzled, his sense of when and where more confounded, among the improbable events, the incoherent incidents, the inconsistent characters, or no-characters, of some third-rate love intrigue—where the persons shall be a Lord Glendamour and a Miss Rivers, and the scene only alternate between Bath and Bond Street—a more bewildering dreaminess induced upon him, than he has felt wandering over all the fairy grounds of Spenser. In the productions we refer to, nothing but names and places is familiar; the persons are neither of this world nor of any other conceivable one; an endless string of activities without purpose, or purposes destitute of motive:—we meet phantoms in our known walks; *fantasques* only christened. In the poet we have names which announce fiction; and we have absolutely no place at all, for the things and persons of the *Fairy Queen* prate not of their “whereabout.” But in their inner nature, and the law of their speech and

³ Lane was a popular publisher.

actions, we are at home and upon acquainted ground. The one turns life into a dream; the other to the wildest dreams gives the sobrieties of every-day occurrences. By what subtle art of tracing the mental processes it is effected, we are not philosophers enough to explain, but in that wonderful episode of the cave of Mammon,⁴ in which the Money God appears first in the lowest form of a miser, is then a worker of metals, and becomes the god of all the treasures of the world; and has a daughter, Ambition, before whom all the world kneels for favors—with the Hesperian fruit, the waters of Tantalus, with Pilate washing his hands vainly, but not impertinently, in the same stream—that we should be at one moment in the cave of an old hoarder of treasures, at the next at the forge of the Cyclops, in a palace and yet in hell, all at once, with the shifting mutations of the most rambling dream, and our judgment yet all the time awake, and neither able nor willing to detect the fallacy,—is a proof of that hidden sanity which still guides the poet in the widest seeming-aberrations.

It is not enough to say that the whole episode is a copy of the mind's conceptions in sleep; it is, in some sort—but what a copy! Let the most romantic of us, that has been entertained all night with the spectacle of some wild and magnificent vision, recombine it in the morning, and try it by his waking judgment. That which appeared so shifting, and yet so coherent, while that faculty was passive, when it comes under cool examination, shall appear so reasonless and so unlinked, that we are ashamed to have been so deluded, and to have taken, though but in sleep, a monster for a god. But the transitions in this episode are every whit as violent as in the most extravagant dream, and yet the waking judgment ratifies them.

⁴ *Faerie Queene*, Bk. ii, canto vii.

CHARACTERS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

WILLIAM HAZLITT

[Hazlitt's volume bearing the above title appeared in 1817. The essays were based on current theatrical criticism which he had contributed to journals.]

HAMLET

This is that Hamlet the Dane, whom we read of in our youth and whom we may be said almost to remember in our after-years; he who made that famous soliloquy on life, who gave the advice to the players, who thought "this goodly frame, the earth, a sterile promontory, and this brave o'erhanging firmament, the air, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors"; whom "man delighted not, nor woman neither"; he who talked with the grave-diggers, and moralized on Yorick's skull; the school-fellow of Rosencrans and Guildenstern at Wittenberg; the friend of Horatio; the lover of Ophelia; he that was mad and sent to England; the slow avenger of his father's death; who lived at the court of Horwendillus five hundred years before we were born, but all whose thoughts we seem to know as well as we do our own, because we have read them in Shakespeare.

Hamlet is a name; his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is *we* who are Hamlet. This play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history. Whoever has become thoughtful and melancholy through his own mishaps or those of others; whoever has borne about with him the clouded brow of reflection, and thought himself "too much i' the sun"; whoever has seen the golden lamp of day dimmed by envious mists rising in his own breast, and could find in the world before him only a dull blank with nothing left remarkable in it; whoever has known "the pangs of despised love, the insolence of office, or the spurns which patient merit of the

unworthy takes"; he who has felt his mind sink within him, and sadness cling to his heart like a malady, who has had his hopes blighted and his youth staggered by the apparition of strange things; who cannot be well at ease, while he sees evil hovering near him like a specter; whose powers of action have been eaten up by thought; he to whom the universe seems infinite, and himself nothing; whose bitterness of soul makes him careless of consequences, and who goes to a play as his best resource to shove off, to a second remove, the evils of life by a mock representation of them—this is the true Hamlet.

We have been so used to this tragedy that we hardly know how to criticize it, any more than we should know how to describe our own faces. But we must make such observations as we can. It is the one of Shakespeare's plays that we think of the oftenest, because it abounds most in striking reflections on human life, and because the distresses of Hamlet are transferred, by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity. Whatever happens to him we apply to ourselves, because he applies it so himself as a means of general reasoning. He is a great moralizer; and what makes him worth attending to is that he moralizes on his own feelings and experience. He is not a commonplace pedant. If *Lear* is distinguished by the greatest depth of passion, *Hamlet* is the most remarkable for the ingenuity, originality, and unstudied development of character. Shakespeare had more magnanimity than any other poet, and he has shown more of it in this play than in any other. There is no attempt to force an interest: everything is left for time and circumstances to unfold. The attention is excited without effort, the incidents succeed each other as matters of course, the characters think and speak and act just as they might do if left entirely to themselves. There is no set purpose, no straining at a point. The observations are suggested by the passing scene—the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind. The whole play is an exact transcript of what might be supposed to have taken place at the court of Denmark, at the remote period of time fixed upon, before the modern refinements in morals and manners were heard of. It would have been interesting enough to have been

admitted as a bystander in such a scene at such a time, to have heard and witnessed something of what was going on. But here we are more than spectators. We have not only "the outward passions and the signs of grief," but "we have that within which passes show." We read the thoughts of the heart, we catch the passions living as they rise. Other dramatic writers give us very fine versions and paraphrases of nature; but Shakespeare, together with his own comments, gives us the original text, that we may judge for ourselves. This is a very great advantage.

The character of Hamlet stands quite by itself. It is not a character marked by strength of will or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment. Hamlet is as little of the hero as a man can well be: but he is a young and princely novice, full of high enthusiasm and quick sensibility—the sport of circumstances, questioning with fortune and refining on his own feelings, and forced from the natural bias of his disposition by the strangeness of his situation. He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again, where he alters the letters which Rosencrans and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death. At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and skeptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution,¹ defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act "that has no relish of salvation in it."

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying,
And now I'll do 't.—And so he goes to heaven,

¹ Hazlitt may have derived this interpretation of the scene from Coleridge, who, in his notes on the passage, refers to Dr. Johnson's objection to it as a "mistaking of the marks of reluctance and procrastination for impetuous, horror-striking fiendishness."

And so am I reveng'd. *That would be scann'd.*
 A villain kills my father, and for that,
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send
 To heaven.² . . .

He is the prince of philosophical speculators; and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether. So he scruples to trust the suggestions of the ghost, contrives the scene of the play to have surer proof of his uncle's guilt, and then rests satisfied with his confirmation of his suspicions, and the success of his experiment, instead of acting upon it. Yet he is sensible of his own weakness, taxes himself with it, and tries to reason himself out of it.

How all occasions do inform against me,
 And spur my dull revenge! [etc.]³ . . .

Still he does nothing; and this very speculation on his own infirmity only affords him another occasion for indulging it. It is not from any want of attachment to his father or of abhorrence of his murder that Hamlet is thus dilatory, but it is more to his taste to indulge his imagination in reflecting upon the enormity of the crime and refining on his schemes of vengeance, than to put them into immediate practice. His ruling passion is to think, not to act; and any vague pretext that flatters this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes.

The moral perfection of this character has been called in question, we think, by those who did not understand it. It is more interesting than according to rules; amiable, though not faultless. The ethical delineations of "that noble and liberal casuist" (as Shakespeare has been well called) do not exhibit the drab-colored quakerism of morality. His plays are not copied from *The Whole Duty of Man* or from *The Academy of Compliments*!⁴

² III, iii, 72-78. The omission is a misquotation of a few more lines.

³ IV, iv, 32-33. Hazlitt quotes the entire soliloquy (32-66).

⁴ *The Whole Duty of Man* was an anonymous treatise, published 1659; *The Academy of Compliments*, with the sub-title *The Whole Art of Courtship*, belonged to the same period.

We confess we are a little shocked at the want of refinement in those who are shocked at the want of refinement in Hamlet. The neglect of punctilious exactness in his behavior either partakes of the "license of the time," or else belongs to the very excess of intellectual refinement in the character, which makes the common rules of life, as well as his own purposes, sit loose upon him. He may be said to be amenable only to the tribunal of his own thoughts, and is too much taken up with the airy world of contemplation to lay as much stress as he ought on the practical consequences of things. His habitual principles of action are unhinged and out of joint with the time. His conduct to Ophelia is quite natural in his circumstances. It is that of assumed severity only. It is the effect of disappointed hope, of bitter regrets, of affection suspended, not obliterated, by the distractions of the scene around him! Amidst the natural and preternatural horrors of his situation, he might be excused in delicacy from carrying on a regular courtship. When "his father's spirit was in arms," it was not a time for the son to make love in. He could neither marry Ophelia, nor wound her mind by explaining the cause of his alienation, which he durst hardly trust himself to think of. It would have taken him years to have come to a direct explanation on the point. In the harassed state of his mind, he could not have done much otherwise than he did. His conduct does not contradict what he says when he sees her funeral,—

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
 Could not with all their quantity of love
 Make up my sum.*

Nothing can be more affecting or beautiful than the Queen's apostrophe to Ophelia on throwing the flowers into the grave.

Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
 I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife:
 I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
 And not to have strew'd thy grave.*

* V, i. 292-94.

* Ibid., 266-69.

Shakespeare was thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of human character, and he here shows us the Queen, who was so criminal in some respects, not without sensibility and affection in other relations of life. Ophelia is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon. Oh, rose of May, oh, flower too soon faded! Her love, her madness, her death, are described with the truest touches of tenderness and pathos. It is a character which nobody but Shakespeare could have drawn in the way he has done, and to the conception of which there is not even the smallest approach, except in some of the old romantic ballads.⁷ Her brother, Laertes, is a character we do not like so well: he is too hot and choleric, and somewhat rhodomontade. Polonius is a perfect character in its kind; nor is there any foundation for the objections which have been made to the consistency of this part. It is said that he acts very foolishly and talks very sensibly. There is no inconsistency in that. Again, that he talks wisely at one time and foolishly at another; that his advice to Laertes is very excellent, and his advice to the King and Queen on the subject of Hamlet's madness very ridiculous. But he gives the one as a father, and is sincere in it; he gives the other as a mere courtier, a busybody, and is accordingly officious, garrulous, and impertinent. In short, Shakespeare has been accused of inconsistency in this and other characters, only because he has kept up the distinction which there is in nature, between the understandings and the moral habits of men, between the absurdity of their ideas and the absurdity of their motives. Polonius is not a fool, but he makes himself so. His folly, whether in his actions or speeches, comes under the head of impropriety of intention.

We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all *Hamlet*.⁸ There is no play that suffers so much.

⁷ In the account of her death, a friend has pointed out an instance of the poet's exact observation of nature:

There is a willow growing o'er a brook,
That shows its hoary leaves i' th' glassy stream.
The inside of the leaves of the willow, next the water, is of a whitish color, and the reflection would therefore be "hoary."
[Hazlitt's note.]

⁸ With this whole paragraph, compare Lamb, p. 174.

in being transferred to the stage. Hamlet himself seems hardly capable of being acted. Mr. Kemble unavoidably fails in this character, from a want of ease and variety. The character of Hamlet is made up of undulating lines; it has the yielding flexibility of "a wave o' th' sea." Mr. Kemble plays it like a man in armor, with a determined inveteracy of purpose, in one undeviating straight line, which is as remote from the natural grace and refined susceptibility of the character as the sharp angles and abrupt starts which Mr. Kean introduces into the part. Mr. Kean's Hamlet is as much too splenetic and rash as Mr. Kemble's is too deliberate and formal. His manner is too strong and pointed. He throws a severity, approaching to virulence, into the common observations and answers. There is nothing of this in Hamlet. He is, as it were, wrapped up in his reflections, and only *thinks aloud*. There should therefore be no attempt to impress what he says upon others by a studied exaggeration of emphasis or manner,—no *talking* at his hearers. There should be as much of the gentleman and scholar as possible infused into the part, and as little of the actor. A pensive air of sadness should sit reluctantly upon his brow, but no appearance of fixed and sullen gloom. He is full of weakness and melancholy, but there is no harshness in his nature. He is the most amiable of misanthropes.

MACBETH

Macbeth and *Lear*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*, are usually reckoned Shakespeare's four principal tragedies. *Lear* stands first for the profound intensity of the passion, *Macbeth* for the wildness of the imagination and the rapidity of the action, *Othello* for the progressive interest and powerful alternations of feeling, *Hamlet* for the refined development of thought and sentiment. If the force of genius shown in each of these works is astonishing, their variety is not less so. They are like different creations of the same mind, not one of which has the slightest reference to the rest. This distinctness and originality is indeed the necessary consequence of truth and nature. Shakespeare's genius alone appeared to pos-

sess the resources of nature. He is "your only *tragedy-maker*." His plays have the force of things upon the mind. What he represents is brought home to the bosom as a part of our experience, implanted in the memory as if we had known the places, persons, and things of which he treats. *Macbeth* is like a record of a preternatural and tragical event. It has the rugged severity of an old chronicle with all that the imagination of the poet can engraft upon traditional belief. The castle of Macbeth, round which "the air smells wooingly," and where "the temple-haunting martlet builds," has a real subsistence in the mind; the Weird Sisters meet us in person on "the blasted heath"; the "air-drawn dagger" moves slowly before our eyes; the "gracious Duncan," the "blood-boltered Banquo" stand before us; all that passed through the mind of Macbeth passes, without the loss of a tittle, through ours. All that could actually take place, and all that is possible to be conceived, what was said and what was done, the workings of passion, the spells of magic, are brought before us with the same absolute truth and vividness. Shakespeare excelled in the openings of his plays: ⁹ that of *Macbeth* is the most striking of any. The wildness of the scenery, the sudden shifting of the situations and characters, the bustle, the expectations excited, are equally extraordinary. From the first entrances of the Witches and the description of them when they meet Macbeth,—

What are these
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants of th' earth
And yet are on't?

the mind is prepared for all that follows.

This tragedy is alike distinguished for the lofty imagination it displays, and for the tumultuous vehemence of the action; and the one is made the moving principle of the other. The overwhelming pressure of preternatural agency urges on the tide of human passion with redoubled force. Macbeth himself appears driven along by the violence of his fate like a vessel drifting before a storm:

⁹ Compare Coleridge, p. 151.

he reels to and fro like a drunken man; he staggers under the weight of his own purposes and the suggestions of others; he stands at bay with his situation; and from the superstitious awe and breathless suspense into which the communications of the Weird Sisters throw him, is hurried on with daring impatience to verify their predictions, and with impious and bloody hand to tear aside the veil which hides the uncertainty of the future. He is not equal to the struggle with fate and conscience. He now "bends up each corporal instrument to the terrible feat"; at other times his heart misgives him, and he is cowed and abashed by his success. "The deed, no less than the attempt, confounds him." His mind is assailed by the stings of remorse, and full of "preternatural sollicitings." His speeches and soliloquies are dark riddles on human life, baffling solution, and entangling him in their labyrinths. In thought he is absent and perplexed, sudden and desperate in act, from a distrust of his own resolution. His energy springs from the anxiety and agitation of his mind. His blindly rushing forward on the objects of his ambition and revenge, or his recoiling from them, equally betrays the harassed state of his feelings. This part of his character is admirably set off by being brought in connection with that of Lady Macbeth, whose obdurate strength of will and masculine firmness give her the ascendancy over her husband's faltering virtue. She at once seizes on the opportunity that offers for the accomplishment of all their wished-for greatness, and never flinches from her object till all is over. The magnitude of her resolution almost covers the magnitude of her guilt. She is a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate. She does not excite our loathing and abhorrence like Regan and Goneril. She is only wicked to gain a great end; and is perhaps more distinguished by her commanding presence of mind and inexorable self-will, which do not suffer her to be diverted from a bad purpose, when once formed, by weak and womanly regrets, than by the hardness of her heart or want of natural affections. The impression which her lofty determination of character makes on the mind of Macbeth is well described where he exclaims,—

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males!¹⁰

Nor do the pains she is at to "screw his courage to the sticking-place," the reproach to him, not to be "lost so poorly in himself," the assurance that "a little water clears them of this deed," show anything but her greater consistency in depravity. Her strong-nerved ambition furnishes ribs of steel to "the sides of his intent"; and she is herself wound up to the execution of her baneful project with the same unshrinking fortitude in crime that in other circumstances she would probably have shown patience in suffering. The deliberate sacrifice of all other considerations to the gaining "for their future days and nights sole sovereign sway and masterdom," by the murder of Duncan, is gorgeously expressed in her invocation on hearing of "his fatal entrance under her battlements":

Come all you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here:
And fill me, from the crown to th' toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty.¹¹ . . .

When she first hears that "Duncan comes there to sleep" she is so overcome by the news, which is beyond her utmost expectations, that she answers the messenger, "Thou'rt mad to say it": and on receiving her husband's account of the predictions of the Witches, conscious of his instability of purpose, and that her presence is necessary to goad him on to the consummation of his promised greatness, she exclaims—

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal.¹²

This swelling exultation and keen spirit of triumph, this uncontrollable eagerness of anticipation, which seems to

¹⁰ I, vii, 72-74.

¹¹ I, v, 41-44. Hazlitt continues the quotation to line 55.

¹² Ibid., 26-31.

dilate her form and take possession of all her faculties, this solid, substantial, flesh-and-blood display of passion, exhibit a striking contrast to the cold, abstracted, gratuitous, servile malignity of the Witches, who are equally instrumental in urging Macbeth to his fate for the mere love of mischief, and from a disinterested delight in deformity and cruelty. They are hags of mischief, obscene panders to iniquity, malicious from their impotence of enjoyment, enamored of destruction, because they are themselves unreal, abortive, half-existences—who become sublime from their exemption from all human sympathies and contempt for all human affairs, as Lady Macbeth does by the force of passion! Her fault seems to have been an excess of that strong principle of self-interest and family aggrandizement, not amenable to the common feelings of compassion and justice, which is so marked a feature in barbarous nations and times. A passing reflection of this kind, on the resemblance of the sleeping king to her father, alone prevents her from slaying Duncan with her own hand.

In speaking of the character of Lady Macbeth, we ought not to pass over Mrs. Siddons's manner of acting that part. We can conceive of nothing grander. It was something above nature. It seemed almost as if a being of a superior order had dropped from a higher sphere to awe the world with the majesty of her appearance. Power was seated on her brow, passion emanated from her breast as from a shrine; she was tragedy personified. In coming on in the sleeping scene, her eyes were open, but their sense was shut. She was like a person bewildered and unconscious of what she did. Her lips moved involuntarily—all her gestures were involuntary and mechanical. She glided on and off the stage like an apparition. To have seen her in that character was an event in every one's life, not to be forgotten.

The dramatic beauty of the character of Duncan, which excites the respect and pity even of his murderers, has been often pointed out. It forms a picture of itself. An instance of the author's power of giving a striking effect to a common reflection, by the manner of introducing it, occurs in a speech of Duncan, complaining of his having been deceived in his opinion of the Thane of Cawdor,

at the very moment that he is expressing the most unbounded confidence in the loyalty and services of Macbeth.

There is no art
To find the mind's construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust. O worthiest cousin!
The sin of my ingratitude even now
Was great upon me, etc.¹³

Another passage to show that Shakespeare lost sight of nothing that could in any way give relief or heightening to his subject, is the conversation which takes place between Banquo and Fleance immediately before the murder-scene of Duncan.

Banquo. How goes the night, boy?
Fleance. The moon is down: I have not heard the clock.
Banquo. And she goes down at twelve.
Fleance. I take it 'tis later, sir.
Banquo. Hold, take my sword. There's husbandry in heaven,
Their candles are all out,—
A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
And yet I would not sleep: merciful Powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose.¹⁴

In like manner, a fine idea is given of the gloomy coming on of evening, just as Banquo is going to be assassinated.

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood.

Now spurs the lated traveler apace
To gain the timely inn.¹⁵

Macbeth (generally speaking) is done upon a stronger and more systematic principle of contrast than any other of Shakespeare's plays. It moves upon the verge of an abyss, and is a constant struggle between life and death. The action is desperate and the reaction is dreadful. It is a huddling together of fierce extremes, a war of opposite

¹³ I, iv, 11-16.

¹⁴ II, i, 1-9.

¹⁵ III, ii, 50-51; iii, 6-7.

natures which of them shall destroy the other. There is nothing but what has a violent end or violent beginnings. The lights and shades are laid on with a determined hand; the transitions from triumph and despair, from the height of terror to the repose of death, are sudden and startling; every passion brings in its fellow-contrary, and the thoughts pitch and jostle against each other as in the dark. The whole play is an unruly chaos of strange and forbidden things, where the ground rocks under our feet. Shakespeare's genius here took its full swing, and trod upon the farthest bounds of nature and passion. This circumstance will account for the abruptness and violent antitheses of the style, the throes and labor which run through the expression, and from defects will turn them into beauties. "So fair and foul a day I have not seen." etc. "Such welcome and unwelcome news together." "Men's lives are like the flowers in their caps, dying ere they sicken." "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it." The scene before the castle gate follows the appearance of the Witches on the heath, and is followed by a midnight murder. Duncan is cut off sometimes by treason leagued with witchcraft, and Macduff is ripped untimely from his mother's womb to avenge his death. Macbeth, after the death of Banquo, wishes for his presence in extravagant terms, "To him and all we thirst," and when his ghost appears, cries out, "Avaunt and quit my sight," and being gone, he is "himself again." Macbeth resolves to get rid of Macduff, that "he may sleep in spite of thunder"; and cheers his wife on the doubtful intelligence of Banquo's taking-off with the encouragement: "Then be thou jocund: ere the bat has flown his cloistered flight, ere to black Hecate's summons the shard-born beetle has rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done—a deed of dreadful note."¹⁶ In Lady Macbeth's speech, "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done 't,"¹⁷ there is murder and filial piety together; and in urging him to fulfil his vengeance against the defenseless king, her thoughts spare the blood neither of infants nor old age. The description of the Witches is full of the same contradictory principle; they "rejoice

¹⁶ III, ii, 40-44.

¹⁷ II, ii, 13-14.

when good kings bleed," they are neither of the earth nor the air, but both; "they should be women, but their beards forbid it"; they take all the pains possible to lead Macbeth on to the height of his ambition, only to betray him "in deeper consequence," and after showing him all the pomp of their art, discover their malignant delight in his disappointed hopes, by that bitter taunt, "Why stands Macbeth thus amazedly?" We might multiply such instances everywhere.

The leading features in the character of Macbeth are striking enough, and they form what may be thought at first only a bold, rude, Gothic outline. By comparing it with other characters of the same author we shall perceive the absolute truth and identity which is observed in the midst of the giddy whirl and rapid career of events. Macbeth in Shakespeare no more loses his identity of character in the fluctuations of fortune or the storm of passion, than Macbeth in himself would have lost the identity of his person. Thus he is as distinct a being from Richard III as it is possible to imagine, though these two characters in common hands, and indeed in the hands of any other poet, would have been a repetition of the same general idea, more or less exaggerated. For both are tyrants, usurpers, murderers, both aspiring and ambitious, both courageous, cruel, treacherous. But Richard is cruel from nature and constitution. Macbeth becomes so from accidental circumstances. Richard is from his birth deformed in body and mind, and naturally incapable of good. Macbeth is full of "the milk of human kindness," is frank, sociable, generous. He is tempted to the commission of guilt by golden opportunities, by the instigations of his wife, and by prophetic warnings. Fate and metaphysical aid conspire against his virtue and his loyalty. Richard on the contrary needs no prompter, but wades through a series of crimes to the height of his ambition from the ungovernable violence of his temper and a reckless love of mischief. He is never gay but in the prospect or in the success of his villainies: Macbeth is full of horror at the thoughts of the murder of Duncan, which he is with difficulty prevailed on to commit, and of remorse after its perpetration. Richard has no mixture of common humanity in his composition,

no regard to kindred or posterity, he owns no fellowship with others, he is "himself alone." Macbeth is not destitute of feelings of sympathy, is accessible to pity, is even made in some measure the dupe of his uxoriousness, ranks the loss of friends, of the cordial love of his followers, and of his good name, among the causes which have made him weary of life, and regrets that he has ever seized the crown by unjust means, since he cannot transmit it to his posterity—

For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind—
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd, . . .
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings.¹⁸

In the agitation of his mind, he envies those whom he has sent to peace. "Duncan is in his grave; after life's fitful fever he sleeps well." It is true, he becomes more callous as he plunges deeper in guilt, "direness is thus rendered familiar to his slaughterous thoughts," and he in the end anticipates his wife in the boldness and bloodiness of his enterprises, while she, for want of the same stimulus of action, "is troubled with thick-coming fancies that rob her of her rest," goes mad and dies. Macbeth endeavors to escape from reflection on his crimes by repelling their consequences, and banishes remorse for the past by the meditation of future mischief. This is not the principle of Richard's cruelty, which displays the wanton malice of a fiend as much as the frailty of human passion. Macbeth is goaded on to acts of violence and retaliation by necessity; to Richard, blood is a pastime. There are other decisive differences inherent in the two characters. Richard may be regarded as a man of the world, a plotting, hardened knave, wholly regardless of everything but his own ends, and the means to secure them. Not so Macbeth. The superstitions of the age, the rude state of society, the local scenery and customs, all give a wildness and imaginary grandeur to his character. From the strangeness of the events that surround him, he is full of amazement and fear; and stands in doubt between the world of reality and the world of fancy. He sees sights not shown to mortal eye, and hears

¹⁸ III, 1, 65-66, 70.

unearthly music. All is tumult and disorder within and without his mind; his purposes recoil upon himself, are broken and disjointed; he is the double thrall of his passions and his evil destiny. Richard is not a character either of imagination or pathos, but of pure self-will. There is no conflict of opposite feelings in his breast. The apparitions which he sees only haunt him in his sleep; nor does he live, like Macbeth, in a waking dream. Macbeth has considerable energy and manliness of character; but then he is "subject to all the skyey influences." He is sure of nothing but the present moment. Richard in the busy turbulence of his projects never loses his self-possession, and makes use of every circumstance that happens as an instrument of his long-reaching designs. In his last extremity we can only regard him as a wild beast taken in the toils; while we never lose our concern for Macbeth; and he calls back all our sympathy by that fine close of thoughtful melancholy—

My way of life
Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.¹⁹

We can conceive a common actor to play Richard tolerably well; we can conceive no one to play Macbeth properly, or to look like a man that had encountered the Weird Sisters. All the actors that we have ever seen appear as if they had encountered them on the boards of Covent Garden or Drury Lane, but not on the heath at Fores, and as if they did not believe what they had seen. The Witches of Macbeth indeed are ridiculous on the modern stage, and we doubt if the Furies of Æschylus would be more respected. The progress of manners and knowledge has an influence on the stage, and will in time perhaps destroy both tragedy and comedy. Filch's picking pockets in the *Beggar's Opera*²⁰ is not so good a jest

¹⁹ V, iii, 22-28.

²⁰ A comic opera, the libretto by John Gay, first produced in 1728.

as it used to be; by the force of the police and of philosophy, Lillo's murders²¹ and the ghosts in Shakespeare will become obsolete. At last there will be nothing left, good nor bad, to be desired or dreaded, on the theater or in real life.

A question has been started with respect to the originality of Shakespeare's Witches, which has been well answered by Mr. Lamb in his notes to the *Specimens of Early Dramatic Poetry*:

"Though some resemblance may be traced between the charms in *Macbeth* and the incantations in this play [*The Witch of Middleton*], which is supposed to have preceded it, this coincidence will not detract much from the originality of Shakespeare. His witches are distinguished from the witches of Middleton by essential differences. These are creatures to whom man or woman plotting some dire mischief might resort for occasional consultation. Those originate deeds of blood, and begin bad impulses to men. From the moment that their eyes first meet with Macbeth's, he is spell-bound. That meeting sways his destiny. He can never break the fascination. These witches can hurt the body; those have power over the soul. Hecate in Middleton has a son, a low buffoon: the hags of Shakespeare have neither child of their own, nor seem to be descended from any parent. They are foul anomalies, of whom we know not whence they are sprung, nor whether they have beginning or ending. As they are without human passions, so they seem to be without human relations. They come with thunder and lightning, and vanish to airy music. This is all we know of them. Except Hecate, they have no names, which heightens their mysteriousness. The names, and some of the properties, which Middleton has given to his hags excite smiles. The Weird Sisters are serious things. Their presence cannot co-exist with mirth. But, in a lesser degree, the witches of Middleton are fine creations. Their power too is in some measure over the mind. They raise jars, jealousies, strifes, *like a thick scurf o'er life.*"

²¹ See note on p. 175.

FALSTAFF

If Shakespeare's fondness for the ludicrous sometimes led to faults in his tragedies (which was not often the case), he has made us amends by the character of Falstaff. This is perhaps the most substantial comic character that ever was invented. Sir John carries a most portly presence in the mind's eye, and in him, not to speak it profanely, "we behold the fulness of the spirit of wit and humor bodily." We are as well acquainted with his person as his mind, and his jokes come upon us with double force and relish from the quantity of flesh through which they make their way, as he shakes his fat sides with laughter, or "lards the lean earth as he walks along." Other comic characters seem, if we approach and handle them, to resolve themselves into air, "into thin air"; but this is embodied and palpable to the grossest apprehension; it lies "three fingers deep upon the ribs," it plays about the lungs and the diaphragm with all the force of animal enjoyment. His body is like a good estate to his mind, from which he receives rents and revenues of profit and pleasure in kind, according to its extent and the richness of the soil.

Wit is often a meager substitute for pleasurable sensation; an effusion of spleen and petty spite at the comforts of others, from feeling none in itself. Falstaff's wit is an emanation of a fine constitution; an exuberance of good humor and good nature; an overflowing of his love of laughter and good-fellowship; a giving vent to his heart's ease, and over-contentment with himself and others. He would not be in character, if he were not so fat as he is; for there is the greatest keeping in the boundless luxury of his imagination and the pampered self-indulgence of his physical appetites. He manures and nourishes his mind with jests, as he does his body with sack and sugar. He carves out his jokes, as he would a capon or a haunch of venison, where there is "cut and come again," and pours out upon them the oil of gladness. His tongue drops fatness, and in the chambers of his brain "it snows of meat and drink."²² He keeps up perpetual holiday and

²² As Chaucer said of the Franklin's house (Prologue to *Canterbury Tales*, line 345).

open house, and we live with him in a round of invitations to a rump and dozen.

Yet we are not to suppose that he was a mere sensualist. All this is as much in imagination as in reality. His sensuality does not engross and stupefy his other faculties, but "ascends me into the brain, clears away all the dull, crude vapours that environ it, and makes it full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes."²³ His imagination keeps up the ball after his senses have done with it. He seems to have even a greater enjoyment of the freedom from restraint, of good cheer, of his ease, of his vanity, in the ideal exaggerated description which he gives of them, than in fact. He never fails to enrich his discourse with allusions to eating and drinking, but we never see him at table. He carries his own larder about with him, and he is himself "a tun of man." His pulling out the bottle in the field of battle²⁴ is a joke to show his contempt for glory accompanied with danger, his systematic adherence to his Epicurean philosophy in the most trying circumstances. Again, such is his deliberate exaggeration of his own vices, that it does not seem quite certain whether the account of his hostess's bill, found in his pocket,²⁵ with such out-of-the-way charge for capons and sack with only one halfpenny-worth of bread, was not put there by himself as a trick to humor the jest upon his favorite propensities, and as a conscious caricature of himself. He is represented as a liar, a braggart, a coward, a glutton, etc., and yet we are not offended but delighted with him; for he is all these as much to amuse others as to gratify himself. He openly assumes all these characters to show the humorous part of them. The unrestrained indulgence of his own ease, appetites, and convenience, has neither malice nor hypocrisy in it. In a word, he is an actor in himself almost

²³ 2 *Henry IV.* IV, iii, 105.

²⁴ 1 *Henry IV.* V, iii. A somewhat similar interpretation of the scene had been made by Maurice Morgann, in his *Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777): "A sober character would not jest on such an occasion, but a coward could not; he would neither have the inclination or the power." For an account of the various critical attempts to rehabilitate Falstaff's character, from Morgann's and Hazlitt's to those of later times, see Dr. E. E. Stoll's essay on "Falstaff," *Modern Philology*, xii, 197.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II, iv, 585.

as much as upon the stage, and we no more object to the character of Falstaff in a moral point of view than we should think of bringing an excellent comedian, who should represent him to the life, before one of the police offices. We only consider the number of pleasant lights in which he puts certain foibles (the more pleasant as they are opposed to the received rules and necessary restraints of society), and do not trouble ourselves about the consequences resulting from them, for no mischievous consequences do result. Sir John is old as well as fat, which gives a melancholy retrospective tinge to the character, and, by the disparity between his inclinations and his capacity for enjoyment, makes it still more ludicrous and fantastical.

The secret of Falstaff's wit is for the most part a masterly presence of mind, an absolute self-possession, which nothing can disturb. His repartees are involuntary suggestions of his self-love,—instinctive evasions of every thing that threatens to interrupt the career of his triumphant jollity and self-complacency. His very size floats him out of all his difficulties in a sea of rich conceits, and he turns round on the pivot of his convenience, with every occasion and at a moment's warning. His natural repugnance to every unpleasant thought or circumstance of itself makes light of objections, and provokes the most extravagant and licentious answers in his own justification. His indifference to truth puts no check upon his invention, and the more improbable and unexpected his contrivances are, the more happily does he seem to be delivered of them, the anticipation of their effect acting as a stimulus to the gayety of his fancy. The success of one adventurous sally gives him spirit to undertake another; he deals always in round numbers, and his exaggerations and excuses are "open, palpable, monstrous as the father that begets them."

ON POETRY IN GENERAL

WILLIAM HAZLITT

[The introductory lecture of a series given at the Surrey Institution in 1818, and published in the same year under the title *Lectures on the English Poets*.]

The best general notion which I can give of poetry is, that it is the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing, by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it.

In treating of poetry, I shall speak first of the subject-matter of it, next of the forms of expression to which it gives birth, and afterwards of its connection with harmony of sound.

Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions. It relates to whatever gives immediate pleasure or pain to the human mind. It comes home to the bosoms and businesses of men; for nothing but what so comes home to them in the most general and intelligible shape can be a subject for poetry. Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself. He who has a contempt for poetry cannot have much respect for himself, or for anything else. It is not a mere frivolous accomplishment, as some persons have been led to imagine,—the trifling amusement of a few idle readers or leisure hours; it has been the study and delight of mankind in all ages. Many people suppose that poetry is something to be found only in books, contained in lines of ten syllables, with like endings; but wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower that “spreads its sweet leaves to the air, and dedicates its beauty to the sun,”—*there* is poetry, in its birth. If history is a grave study, poetry may be said to be a graver: its materials lie deeper, and are spread wider. History treats, for the most part, of the cumbrous and unwieldy masses of things, the empty cases in which the affairs of the world are packed, under the heads of

intrigue or war, in different states, and from century to century: but there is no thought or feeling that can have entered into the mind of man, which he would be eager to communicate to others, or which they would listen to with delight, that is not a fit subject for poetry. It is not a branch of authorship: it is "the stuff of which our life is made." The rest is "mere oblivion," a dead letter: for all that is worth remembering in life is the poetry of it. Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hatred is poetry; contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness, are all poetry. Poetry is that fine particle within us, that expands, rarefies, refines, raises our whole being; without it "man's life is as poor as beast's." Man is a poetical animal; and those of us who do not study the principles of poetry act upon them all our lives, like Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who had always spoken prose without knowing it. The child is a poet in fact, when he first plays at hide-and-seek, or repeats the story of Jack the Giant-killer; the shepherd-boy is a poet, when he first crowns his mistress with a garland of flowers; the countryman, when he stops to look at the rainbow; the city apprentice, when he gazes after the Lord Mayor's show; the miser, when he hugs his gold; the courtier, who builds his hopes upon a smile; the savage, who paints his idol with blood; the slave, who worships a tyrant, or the tyrant, who fancies himself a god;—the vain, the ambitious, the proud, the choleric man, the hero and the coward, the beggar and the king, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, all live in a world of their own making; and the poet does no more than describe what all the others think and act. If his art is folly and madness, it is folly and madness at second hand. "There is warrant for it." Poets alone have not "such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cooler reason" can.

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact.
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
 That is, the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,

And, as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.
 Such tricks hath strong imagination.¹

If poetry is a dream, the business of life is much the same. If it is a fiction, made up of what we wish things to be, and fancy that they are because we wish them so, there is no other nor better reality. Ariosto has described the loves of Angelica and Medoro:² but was not Medoro, who carved the name of his mistress on the barks of trees, as much enamored of her charms as he? Homer has celebrated the anger of Achilles: but was not the hero as mad as the poet? Plato banished the poets from his Commonwealth,³ lest their descriptions of the natural man should spoil his mathematical man, who was to be without passions and affections, who was neither to laugh nor weep, to feel sorrow nor anger, to be cast down nor elated by anything. This was a chimera, however, which never existed but in the brain of the inventor; and Homer's poetical world has outlived Plato's philosophical Republic.

Poetry, then, is an imitation of nature, but the imagination and the passions are a part of man's nature. We shape things according to our wishes and fancies, without poetry; but poetry is the most emphatical language that can be found for those creations of the mind "which ecstasy is very cunning in." Neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however distinct or forcible, constitutes the ultimate end and aim of poetry, without the heightenings of the imagination. The light of poetry is not only a direct but also a reflected light, that, while it shows us the object, throws a sparkling radiance on all around it: the flame of the passions, communicated to the imagination, reveals to us, as with a flash of lightning, the inmost

¹ *Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, 1, 7-18.

² In the *Orlando Furioso*.

³ See *The Republic*, Book x. "Poetry," said Plato, "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue." (Jowett translation, iii, 322.)

recesses of thought, and penetrates our whole being. Poetry represents forms chiefly as they suggest other forms; feelings, as they suggest forms or other feelings. Poetry puts a spirit of life and motion into the universe. It describes the flowing, not the fixed. It does not define the limits of sense, or analyze the distinctions of the understanding, but signifies the excess of the imagination beyond the actual or ordinary impression of any object or feeling. The poetical impression of any object is that uneasy, exquisite sense of beauty or power that cannot be contained within itself; that is impatient of all limit; that (as flame bends to flame) strives to link itself to some other image of kindred beauty or grandeur; to enshrine itself, as it were, in the highest forms of fancy, and to relieve the aching sense of pleasure by expressing it in the boldest manner, and by the most striking examples of the same quality in other instances. Poetry, according to Lord Bacon, for this reason, "has something divine in it, because it raises the mind and hurries it into sublimity, by conforming the shows of things to the desires of the soul, instead of subjecting the soul to external things, as reason and history do."⁴ It is strictly the language of the imagination; and the imagination is that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power. This language is not the less true to nature, because it is false in point of fact; but so much the more true and natural, if it conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes on the mind. Let an object, for instance, be presented to the senses in a state of agitation or fear—and the imagination will distort or magnify the object, and convert it into the likeness of whatever is most proper to encourage the fear. "Our eyes are made the fools" of our other faculties. This is the universal law of the imagination,

That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;

⁴ *Advancement of Learning*, Book II.

Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear!⁵

When Iachimo says of Imogen,

The flame o' th' taper
Bows toward her, and would under-peep her lids
To see the enclosed lights,⁶

this passionate interpretation of the motion of the flame to accord with the speaker's own feelings, is true poetry. The lover, equally with the poet, speaks of the auburn tresses of his mistress as locks of shining gold. We compare a man of gigantic stature to a tower: not that he is anything like so large, but because the excess of his size beyond what we are accustomed to expect, or the usual size of things of the same class, produces by contrast a greater feeling of magnitude and ponderous strength than another object of ten times the same dimensions. The intensity of the feeling makes up for the disproportion of the objects. Things are equal, to the imagination, which have the power of affecting the mind with an equal degree of terror, admiration, delight, or love. When Lear calls upon the heavens to avenge his cause, "for they are old like him,"⁷ there is nothing extravagant or impious in this sublime identification of his age with theirs; for there is no other image which could do justice to the agonizing sense of his wrongs and his despair!

Poetry is the high-wrought enthusiasm of fancy and feeling. As, in describing natural objects, it impregnates sensible impressions with the forms of fancy, so it describes the feelings of pleasure or pain by blending them with the strongest movements of passion and the most striking forms of nature. Tragic poetry, which is the most impassioned species of it, strives to carry on the feeling to the utmost point of sublimity or pathos, by all the force of comparison or contrast; loses the sense of present suffering in the imaginary exaggeration of it;

⁵ *Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i, 19-22.

⁶ *Cymbeline*, II, ii, 19-21.

⁷ See *King Lear*, II, iv, 194. Compare Lamb's remark on the same passage, p. 183.

exhausts the terror or pity by an unlimited indulgence of it; grapples with impossibilities in its desperate impatience of restraint; throws us back upon the past, forward into the future; brings every moment of our being or object of nature in startling review before us; and in the rapid whirl of events, lifts us from the depths of woe to the highest contemplations on human life. When Lear says of Edgar, "Nothing but his unkind daughters could have brought him to this,"⁸ what a bewildered amazement, what a wrench of the imagination, that cannot be brought to conceive of any other cause of misery than that which has bowed it down, and absorbs all other sorrow in its own! Again, when he exclaims in the mad scene, "The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanche, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me!"⁹ it is lending occasion to imagination to make every creature in league against him, conjuring up ingratitude and insult in their least looked-for and most galling shapes, searching every thread and fiber of his heart, and finding out the least remaining image of respect or attachment in the bottom of his breast, only to torture and kill it! In like manner, the "So I am"¹⁰ of Cordelia gushes from her heart like a torrent of tears, relieving it of a weight of love and of supposed ingratitude which had pressed upon it for years. What a fine return of the passion upon itself is that in Othello—with what a mingled agony of regret and despair he clings to the last traces of departed happiness—when he exclaims,

Oh now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind. Farewell content;
Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars,
That make ambition virtue! Oh farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war:
And O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
Th' immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!¹¹

⁸ III, iv, 72-73. Hazlitt quotes inaccurately, as usual.

⁹ III, vi, 65-66.

¹⁰ IV, vii, 70.

¹¹ *Othello*, III, iii, 347-57.

How his passion lashes itself up and swells and rages like a tide in its sounding course, when, in answer to the doubts expressed of his returning love, he says,

Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont:
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.¹²

The climax of his expostulation afterwards with Desdemona is at that line,

But there where I have garner'd up my heart, . . .
To be discarded thence!¹³

One mode in which the dramatic exhibition of passion excites our sympathy without raising our disgust is, that in proportion as it sharpens the edge of calamity and disappointment, it strengthens the desire of good. It enhances our consciousness of the blessing, by making us sensible of the magnitude of the loss. The storm of passion lays bare and shows us the rich depths of the human soul:¹⁴ the whole of our existence, the sum total of our passions and pursuits, of that which we desire and that which we dread, is brought before us by contrast; the action and re-action are equal; the keenness of immediate suffering only gives us a more intense aspiration after, and a more intimate participation with, the antagonist world of good; makes us drink deeper of the cup of human life; tugs at the heart-strings; loosens the pressure about them; and calls the springs of thought and feeling into play with tenfold force.

Impassioned poetry is an emanation of the moral and intellectual part of our nature, as well as of the sensitive,—of the desire to know, the will to act, and the power to feel; and ought to appeal to these different parts

¹² *Ibid.*, 453-60.

¹³ *IV*, ii, 57, 60.

¹⁴ Compare Lamb on Lear, p. 183.

of our constitution, in order to be perfect. The domestic or prose tragedy, which is thought to be the most natural, is in this sense the least so, because it appeals almost exclusively to one of these faculties, our sensibility. The tragedies of Moore and Lillo,¹⁵ for this reason, however affecting at the time, oppress and lie like a dead weight upon the mind, a load of misery which it is unable to throw off: the tragedy of Shakespeare, which is true poetry, stirs our inmost affections, abstracts evil from itself by combining it with all the forms of imagination, and with the deepest workings of the heart, and rouses the whole man within us.

The pleasure, however, derived from tragic poetry is not anything peculiar to it as poetry, as a fictitious and fanciful thing. It is not an anomaly of the imagination. It has its source and ground-work in the common love of strong excitement. As Mr. Burke observes,¹⁶ people flock to see a tragedy; but if there were a public execution in the next street, the theater would very soon be empty. It is not, then, the difference between fiction and reality that solves the difficulty. Children are satisfied with the stories of ghosts and witches in plain prose: nor do the hawkers of full, true, and particular accounts of murders and executions about the streets, find it necessary to have them turned into penny ballads, before they can dispose of these interesting and authentic documents. The grave politician drives a thriving trade of abuse and calumnies, poured out against those whom he makes his enemies, for no other end than that he may live by them. The popular preacher makes less frequent mention of heaven than of hell. Oaths and nicknames are only a more vulgar sort of poetry or rhetoric. We are as fond of indulging our violent passions as of reading a description of those of others. We are as prone to make a torment of our fears as to luxuriate in our hopes of good. If it be asked, Why do we do so? the best answer will be, Because we cannot help it. The sense of power is as strong a principle in the mind as the love of pleasure. Objects of terror and pity exercise the same des-

¹⁵ Compare Lamb, pp. 175, 179. It will be seen that Hazlitt, doubtless unconsciously, is borrowing from his friend's essay.

¹⁶ *Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Pt. I, Sec. 15.

poetic control over it as those of love or beauty. It is as natural to hate as to love, to despise as to admire, to express our hatred or contempt as our love or admiration.

Masterless passion sways us to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes.¹⁷

Not that we like what we loathe; but we like to indulge our hatred and scorn of it; to dwell upon it, to exasperate our idea of it by every refinement of ingenuity and extravagance of illustration; to make it a bugbear to ourselves, to point it out to others in all the splendor of deformity; to embody it to the senses; to stigmatize it by name; to grapple with it in thought, in action; to sharpen our intellect, to arm our will against it; to know the worst we have to contend with, and to contend with it to the utmost. Poetry is only the highest eloquence of passion, the most vivid form of expression that can be given to our conception of anything, whether pleasurable or painful, mean or dignified, delightful or distressing. It is the perfect coincidence of the image and the words with the feeling we have, and of which we cannot get rid in any other way, that gives an instant "satisfaction to the thought." This is equally the origin of wit and fancy, of comedy and tragedy, of the sublime and the pathetic. When Pope says of the Lord Mayor's show,

Now night descending, the proud scene is o'er,
But lives in Settle's numbers one day more!¹⁸

—when Collins makes Danger, "with limbs of giant mould,"

Throw him on the steep
Of some loose hanging rock asleep;¹⁹

—when Lear calls out in extreme anguish,

Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child
Than the sea-monster!²⁰

¹⁷ *Merchant of Venice*, IV, i, 51-52. (Not the usual text.)

¹⁸ *The Dunciad*, i, 89-90.

¹⁹ "Ode to Fear," lines 14-15 (inaccurately quoted).

²⁰ I, iv, 281-83.

the passion of contempt in the one case, of terror in the other, and of indignation in the last, is perfectly satisfied. We see the thing ourselves, and show it to others as we feel it to exist, and as, in spite of ourselves, we are compelled to think of it. The imagination, by thus embodying and turning them to shape, gives an obvious relief to the indistinct and importunate cravings of the will. We do not wish the thing to be so, but we wish it to appear such as it is. For knowledge is conscious power; and the mind is no longer, in this case, the dupe, though it may be the victim, of vice or folly.

Poetry is in all its shapes the language of the imagination and the passions, of fancy and will. Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the outcry which has been sometimes raised by frigid and pedantic critics, for reducing the language of poetry to the standard of common sense and reason: for the end and use of poetry, "both at the first and now, was and is to hold the mirror up to nature,"²¹ seen through the medium of passion and imagination, not divested of that medium by means of literal truth or abstract reason. The painter of history might as well be required to represent the face of a person who has just trod upon a serpent with the still-life expression of a common portrait, as the poet to describe the most striking and vivid impressions which things can be supposed to make upon the mind, in the language of common conversation. Let who will strip nature of the colors and the shapes of fancy, the poet is not bound to do so; the impressions of common sense and strong imagination, that is, of passion and indifference, cannot be the same, and they must have a separate language to do justice to either. Objects must strike differently upon the mind, independently of what they are in themselves, as long as we have a different interest in them, as we see them in a different point of view, nearer or at a great distance (morally or physically speaking) from novelty, from old acquaintance, from our ignorance of them, from our fear of their consequences, from contrast, from unexpected likeness. We can no more take away the faculty of the imagination, than we can see all objects

²¹ *Hamlet*, III, ii, 24.

without light or shade. Some things must dazzle us by their preternatural light; others must hold us in suspense, and tempt our curiosity to explore their obscurity. Those who would dispel these various illusions, to give us their drab-colored creation in their stead, are not very wise. Let the naturalist, if he will, catch the glow-worm, carry it home with him in a box, and find it next morning nothing but a little gray worm; let the poet or the lover of poetry visit it at evening, when beneath the scented hawthorn and the crescent moon it has built itself a palace of emerald light. This is also one part of nature, one appearance which the glow-worm presents, and that not the least interesting; so poetry is one part of the history of the human mind, though it is neither science nor philosophy. It cannot be concealed, however, that the progress of knowledge and refinement has a tendency to circumscribe the limits of the imagination, and to clip the wings of poetry. The province of the imagination is principally visionary, the unknown and undefined: the understanding restores things to their natural boundaries, and strips them of their fanciful pretensions. Hence the history of religious and poetical enthusiasm is much the same; and both have received a sensible shock from the progress of experimental philosophy.²² It is the undefined and uncommon that gives birth and scope to the imagination; we can only fancy what we do not know. As in looking into the mazes of a tangled wood we fill them with what shapes we please, with ravenous beasts, with caverns vast, and dread enchantments, so in our ignorance of the world about us we make gods or devils of the first object we see; and set no bounds to the wilful suggestions of our hopes and fears.

And visions, as poetic eyes avow,
Hang on each leaf and cling to every bough."²³

There can never be another Jacob's dream. Since that time the heavens have gone farther off, and grown astro-

²² Compare and contrast Wordsworth's view, p. 15.

²³ From a letter of Gray's to Horace Walpole (*Letters*, ed. Tovey, i, 7-8). Hazlitt's editors, Waller and Glover, suggest that it is apparently a translation of the *Æneid*, vi, 282-84.

nomical. They have become averse to the imagination, nor will they return to us on the squares of the distances, or on Doctor Chalmers's *Discourses*.²⁴ Rembrandt's picture brings the matter nearer to us. It is not only the progress of mechanical knowledge, but the necessary advances of civilization, that are unfavorable to the spirit of poetry. We not only stand in less awe of the preternatural world, but we can calculate more surely, and look with more indifference, upon the regular routine of this. The heroes of the fabulous ages rid the world of monsters and giants. At present we are less exposed to the vicissitudes of good or evil, to the incursions of wild beasts or "bandit fierce," or to the unmitigated fury of the elements. The time has been that "our fell of hair would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir as life were in it."²⁵ But the police spoils all; and we now hardly so much as dream of a midnight murder. *Macbeth* is only tolerated in this country for the sake of the music; and in the United States of America, where the philosophical principles of government are carried still farther in theory and practice, we find that the *Beggar's Opera* ²⁶ is hooted from the stage. Society, by degrees, is constructed into a machine that carries us safely and insipidly from one end of life to the other, in a very comfortable prose style.

Obscurity her curtain round them drew,
And siren Sloth a dull quietus sung.²⁷

The remarks which have been here made would, in some measure, lead to a solution of the question of the comparative merits of painting and poetry. I do not mean to give any preference, but it should seem that the argument which has been sometimes set up, that painting must affect the imagination more strongly, because it represents the image more distinctly, is not well founded. We may assume without much temerity that poetry is more poetical than painting. When artists or connois-

²⁴ *Discourses on the Christian Revelation, viewed in connection with Modern Astronomy*, by Dr. Thomas Chalmers, 1817.

²⁵ *Macbeth*, V, v, 11-13.

²⁶ See note on p. 216.

²⁷ From a poem written by Sneyd Davies (1709-1769) "To the Honourable and Reverend F[rederick] C[ornwallis]."

seurs talk on stilts about the poetry of painting, they show that they know little about poetry, and have little love for the art. Painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies. Painting embodies what a thing contains in itself; poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it. But this last is the proper province of the imagination. Again, as it relates to passion, painting gives the event, poetry the progress of events: but it is during the progress, in the interval of expectation and suspense, while our hopes and fears are strained to the highest pitch of breathless agony, that the pinch of the interest lies.

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council, and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.²⁸

But by the time that the picture is painted, all is over. Faces are the best part of a picture; but even faces are not what we chiefly remember in what interests us most. But it may be asked then, Is there anything better than Claude Lorraine's landscapes, than Titian's portraits, than Raphael's cartoons, or the Greek statues? Of the two first I shall say nothing, as they are evidently picturesque, rather than imaginative. Raphael's cartoons are certainly the finest comments that ever were made on the Scriptures. Would their effect be the same, if we were not acquainted with the text? But the New Testament existed before the cartoons. There is one subject of which there is no cartoon: Christ washing the feet of the disciples the night before his death. But that chapter does not need a commentary! It is for want of some such resting-place for the imagination that the Greek statues are little else than specious forms. They are marble to the touch and to the heart. They have not an informing principle within them. In their faultless excellence they appear sufficient to themselves. By their beauty they are raised above the frailties of passion or suffering. By their

²⁸ *Julius Cæsar*, II, 1, 63-69.

beauty they are deified. But they are not objects of religious faith to us, and their forms are a reproach to common humanity. They seem to have no sympathy with us, and not to want our admiration.

Poetry in its matter and form is natural imagery or feeling, combined with passion and fancy. In its mode of conveyance, it combines the ordinary use of language with musical expression. There is a question of long standing, in what the essence of poetry consists; or what it is that determines why one set of ideas should be expressed in prose, another in verse. Milton has told us his idea of poetry in a single line—

Thoughts that voluntary move
Harmonious numbers.²⁹

As there are certain sounds that excite certain movements, and the song and dance go together, so there are, no doubt, certain thoughts that lead to certain tones of voice, or modulations of sound, and change "the words of Mercury into the songs of Apollo." There is a striking instance of this adaptation of the movement of sound and rhythm to the subject, in Spenser's description of the Satyrs accompanying Una to the cave of Sylvanus.

So from the ground she fearless doth arise
And walketh forth without suspect of crime.
They, all as glad as birds of joyous prime,
Thence lead her forth, about her dancing round,
Shouting and singing all a shepherd's rhyme;
And, with green branches strewing all the ground,
Do worship her as queen with olive garland crowned.

And all the way their merry pipes they sound,
That all the woods with doubled echo ring;
And with their horned feet do wear the ground,
Leaping like wanton kids in pleasant spring;
So towards old Sylvanus they her bring,
Who, with the noise awaked, cometh out.³⁰

On the contrary, there is nothing either musical or natural in the ordinary construction of language. It is a thing altogether arbitrary and conventional. Neither in the sounds themselves, which are the voluntary signs of cer-

²⁹ *Paradise Lost*, iii, 37-38.

³⁰ *Faerie Queene*, Bk. i, canto vi, stanzas 13-14.

tain ideas, nor in their grammatical arrangements in common speech, is there any principle of natural imitation, or correspondence to the individual ideas, or to the tone of feeling with which they are conveyed to others. The jerks, the breaks, the inequalities and harshnesses of prose are fatal to the flow of a poetical imagination, as a jolting road or a stumbling horse disturbs the reverie of an absent man. But poetry makes these odds all even. It is the music of language, answering to the music of the mind, untying as it were "the secret soul of harmony." Wherever any object takes such a hold of the mind as to make us dwell upon it, and brood over it, melting the heart in tenderness, or kindling it to a sentiment of enthusiasm;—wherever a movement of imagination or passion is impressed on the mind, by which it seeks to prolong and repeat the emotion, to bring all other objects into accord with it, and to give the same movement of harmony, sustained and continuous, or gradually varied according to the occasion, to the sounds that express it—this is poetry. The musical in sound is the sustained and continuous; the musical in thought is the sustained and continuous also. There is a near connection between music and deep-rooted passion. Mad people sing. As often as articulation passes naturally into intonation, there poetry begins. Where one idea gives a tone and color to others, where one feeling melts others into it, there can be no reason why the same principle should not be extended to the sounds by which the voice utters these emotions of the soul, and blends syllables and lines into each other. It is to supply the inherent defect of harmony in the customary mechanism of language, to make the sound an echo to the sense, when the sense becomes a sort of echo to itself—to mingle the tide of verse, "the golden cadences of poetry," with the tide of feeling, flowing and murmuring as it flows—in short, to take the language of the imagination from off the ground, and enable it to spread its wings where it may indulge its own impulses—

Sailing with supreme dominion
Through the azure deep of air—^a

^a From Gray's "The Progress of Poesy," lines 116-17.

without being stopped, or fretted, or diverted with the abruptness and petty obstacles, and discordant flats and sharps of prose, that poetry was invented. It is to common language what springs are to a carriage, or wings to feet. In ordinary speech we arrive at a certain harmony by the modulations of the voice: in poetry the same thing is done systematically by a regular collocation of syllables. It has been well observed that every one who declaims warmly, or grows intent upon a subject, rises into a sort of blank verse or measured prose. The merchant, as described by Chaucer, went on his way "sounding always the increase of his winning." Every prose writer has more or less of rhythmical adaptation, except poets, who, when deprived of the regular mechanism of verse, seem to have no principle of modulation left in their writings.

An excuse might be made for rhyme in the same manner. It is but fair that the ear should linger on the sounds that delight it, or avail itself of the same brilliant coincidence and unexpected recurrence of syllables that have been displayed in the invention and collocation of images. It is allowed that rhyme assists the memory; and a man of wit and shrewdness has been heard to say that the only four good lines of poetry are the well known ones which tell the number of days in the months of the year: "Thirty days hath September," etc. But if the jingle of names assists the memory, may it not also quicken the fancy? and there are other things worth having at our fingers' ends, besides the contents of the almanac. Pope's versification is tiresome, from its excessive sweetness and uniformity. Shakespeare's blank verse is the perfection of dramatic dialogue.

All is not poetry that passes for such: nor does verse make the whole difference between poetry and prose. The *Iliad* does not cease to be poetry in a literal translation; and Addison's *Campaign*³² has been very properly denominated a gazette in rhyme. Common prose differs from poetry, as treating for the most part either of such trite, familiar, and irksome matters of fact as convey

³² A poem commemorating the Battle of Blenheim, published 1704. It was called a "gazette in rhyme" in Joseph Warton's *Essay on Pope*.

no extraordinary impulse to the imagination, or else of such difficult and laborious processes of the understanding as do not admit of the wayward or violent movements either of the imagination or the passions.

I will mention three works which come as near to poetry as possible without absolutely being so; namely, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Tales of Boccaccio*. Chaucer and Dryden have translated some of the last into English rhyme, but the essence and the power of poetry was there before. That which lifts the spirit above the earth, which draws the soul out of itself with indescribable longings, is poetry in kind, and generally fit to become so in name, by being "married to immortal verse." If it is of the essence of poetry to strike and fix the imagination, whether we will or no, to make the eye of childhood glisten with the starting tear, to be never thought of afterwards with indifference, John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe may be permitted to pass for poets in their way. The mixture of fancy and reality in *The Pilgrim's Progress* was never equaled in any allegory. His pilgrims walk above the earth, and yet are on it. What zeal, what beauty, what truth of fiction! What deep feeling in the description of Christian's swimming across the water at last, and in the picture of the Shining Ones within the gates, with wings at their backs and garlands on their heads, who are to wipe all tears from his eyes! The writer's genius, though not "dipped in dews of Castalie," was baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The prints in this book are no small part of it. If the confinement of Philoctetes in the island of Lemnos was a subject for the most beautiful of all the Greek tragedies,³³ what shall we say to Robinson Crusoe in his? Take the speech of the Greek hero on leaving his cave,³⁴ beautiful as it is, and compare it with the reflec-

³³ *The Philoctetes* of Sophocles.

³⁴ "What bitter tears started from mine eyes,—what miseries were those that I bewailed when I saw that the ships with which I had sailed were all gone, and that there was no man in the place,—not one to help, not one to ease the burden of the sickness that vexed me,—when, looking all around, I could find no provision, save for anguish—but of that a plenteous store, my son! So time went on for me, season by season; and, alone in this narrow house, I was fain to meet each want by my own service." (Jebb's translation.)

tions of the English adventurer in his solitary place of confinement. The thoughts of home, and of all from which he is for ever cut off, swell and press against his bosom, as the heaving ocean rolls its ceaseless tide against the rocky shore, and the very beatings of his heart become audible in the eternal silence that surrounds him. Thus he says:

As I walked about, either in my hunting, or for viewing the country, the anguish of my soul at my condition would break out upon me on a sudden, and my very heart would die within me to think of the woods, the mountains, the deserts I was in; and how I was a prisoner, locked up with the eternal bars and bolts of the ocean, in an uninhabited wilderness, without redemption. In the midst of the greatest composes of my mind, this would break out upon me like a storm, and make me wring my hands, and weep like a child. Sometimes it would take me in the middle of my work, and I would immediately sit down and sigh, and look upon the ground for an hour or two together, and this was still worse to me, for if I could burst into tears or vent myself in words, it would go off, and the grief, having exhausted itself, would abate.

The story of his adventures would not make a poem like the *Odyssey*, it is true; but the relator had the true genius of a poet. It has been made a question whether Richardson's romances³⁵ are poetry; and the answer perhaps is, that they are not poetry because they are not romance. The interest is worked up to an inconceivable height; but it is by an infinite number of little things, by incessant labor and calls upon the attention, by a repetition of blows that have no rebound in them. The sympathy excited is not a voluntary contribution, but a tax. Nothing is unforced and spontaneous. There is a want of elasticity and motion. The story does not "give an echo to the seat where love is throned." The heart does not answer of itself like a chord in music. The fancy does not run on before the writer with breathless expectation, but is dragged along with an infinite number of pins and wheels, like those with which the Lilliputians dragged Gulliver pinioned to the royal palace. Sir Charles Grandison is a coxcomb. What sort of a figure

³⁵ *Pamela*, 1740; *Clarissa Harlowe*, 1747-8; *Sir Charles Grandison*, 1753.

would he cut, translated into an epic poem, by the side of Achilles? Clarissa, the divine Clarissa, is too interesting by half. She is interesting in her ruffles, in her gloves, in her samplers, her aunts and uncles—she is interesting in all that is uninteresting. Such things, however intensely they may be brought home to us, are not conductors to the imagination. There is infinite truth and feeling in Richardson; but it is extracted from a *caput mortuum* of circumstances: it does not evaporate of itself. His poetical genius is like Ariel confined in a pine-tree, and requires an artificial process to let it out. Shakespeare says:

Our poesy is as a gum, which oozes
From whence 'tis nourished; . . . our gentle flame
Provokes itself, and like the current flies
Each bound it chafes.³⁶

Burke's writings are not poetry, notwithstanding the vividness of his fancy,³⁷ because the subject-matter is abstruse and dry, not natural but artificial. The difference between poetry and eloquence is, that the one is the eloquence of the imagination and the other of the understanding.³⁸ Eloquence tries to persuade the will, and convince the reason; poetry produces its effect by instantaneous sympathy. Nothing is a subject for poetry that admits of a dispute. Poets are in general bad prose writers, because their images, though fine in themselves, are not to the purpose, and do not carry on the argument. The French poetry wants the forms of the imagination. It is didactic more than dramatic. And some of our own

³⁶ *Timon of Athens*, I, i, 21-25.

³⁷ Compare a passage in Hazlitt's essay on "The Prose Style of Poets": "It has always appeared to me that the most perfect prose style, the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring, that which went nearest to the verge of poetry, and yet never fell over, was Burke's. . . . It differs from poetry, as I conceive, like the chamois from the eagle; it climbs to an almost equal height, touches upon a cloud, overlooks a precipice, is picturesque, sublime,—but all the while, instead of soaring through the air, it stands upon a rocky cliff, clammers up by abrupt and intricate ways, and browses on the roughest bark, or crops the tender flower. The principle which guides his pen is truth, not beauty."

³⁸ This subject, the relation of poetry to eloquence, is discussed by John Stuart Mill in his essay called "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties."

poetry which has been most admired is only poetry in the rhyme, and in the studied use of poetic diction.³⁹ . . .

SIR WALTER SCOTT, RACINE, AND SHAKESPEARE

WILLIAM HAZLITT

[One of the essays of the collection called *The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things*, published 1826. Two or three introductory pages, irrelevant to the subject, are omitted.]

The subject occurred to me from some conversation with a French lady, who entertains a project of introducing Shakespeare in France. As I demurred to the probability of this alteration in the national taste, she endeavored to overcome my despondency by several lively arguments, and among other things urged the instantaneous and universal success of the Scotch Novels among all ranks and conditions of the French people. As Shakespeare had been performing quarantine among them for a century and a half to no purpose, I thought this circumstance rather proved the difference in the genius of the two writers than a change in the taste of the nation. Madame B. stoutly maintained the contrary opinion; and when an Englishman argues with a Frenchwoman, he has very considerable odds against him. The only advantage you have in this case is that you can plead inability to express yourself properly, and may be supposed to have a meaning where you have none. An eager manner will supply the place of distinct ideas, and you have only not to surrender in form, to appear to come off with flying colors. The not being able to make others understand me, however, prevents me from understanding myself, and I was by no means satisfied with the reasons I alleged in the present instance. I tried to mend them the next day, and the following is the result.

³⁹The concluding paragraphs, here omitted, contain "some remarks on four of the principal works of poetry in the world," Homer, the Bible, Dante, and Ossian.

It was supposed at one time that the genius of the author of *Waverley* was confined to Scotland; that his novels and tales were a bundle of national prejudices and local traditions, and that his superiority would desert him, the instant he attempted to cross the Border. He made the attempt, however, and, contrary to these unfavorable prognostics, succeeded. *Ivanhoe*, if not equal to the very best of the Scotch Novels, is very nearly so; and the scenery and manners are truly English. In *Quentin Durward*, again, he made a descent upon France, and gained new laurels, instead of losing his former ones. This seemed to bespeak a versatility of talent and a plastic power, which in the first instance had been called in question. A Scotch mist had been suspected to hang its mystery over the page; his imagination was borne up on Highland superstitions and obsolete traditions, "sailing with supreme dominion" through the murky regions of ignorance and barbarism; and if ever at a loss, his invention was eked out and *got a cast* by means of ancient documents and the records of criminal jurisprudence or fanatic rage. *The Black Dwarf* was a paraphrase of the current anecdotes of David Ritchie, without any additional point or interest; and the story of Effie Deans had slept for a century in the law reports and depositions relative to the Heart of Mid-Lothian. To be sure, nothing could be finer or truer to nature; for the human heart, wherever or however it is awakened, has a stirring power in it, and as to the truth of nature, nothing can be more like nature than the facts, if you know where to find them. But as to sheer invention, there appeared to be about as much as there is in the getting up the melodramatic representation of *The Maid and the Magpie*¹ from the *Causes Célèbres*. The invention is much greater and the effect is not less in Mrs. Inchbald's *Nature and Art*,² where there is nothing that can have been given in evidence but the Trial Scene near the end, and even that is not a legal anecdote, but a pure dramatic fiction. Before I proceed, I may as well dwell on this point a little. The

¹ A comedy, which Hazlitt reviewed for *The Examiner* in September, 1815. The *Causes Célèbres* was a French collection of accounts of celebrated criminal trials.

² A novel, published 1796.

heroine of the story, the once innocent and beautiful Hannah, is brought by a series of misfortunes and crimes (the effect of a misplaced attachment) to be tried for her life at the Old Bailey, and as her Judge, her former lover and seducer, is about to pronounce sentence upon her, she calls out in an agony—"Oh! not from you!" and, as the Hon. Mr. Norwynne proceeds to finish his solemn address, falls in a swoon, and is taken senseless from the bar. I know nothing in the world so affecting as this. Now if Mrs. Inchbald had merely found this story in the *Newgate Calendar*,³ and transplanted it into a novel, I conceive that her merit in point of genius (not to say feeling) would be less than if, having all the other circumstances given, and the apparatus ready, and this explanation alone left blank, she had filled it up from her own heart, that is, from an intense conception of the situation of the parties, so that from the harrowing recollections passing through the mind of the poor girl so circumstanced this uncontrollable gush of feeling would burst from her lips. Just such I apprehend, generally speaking, is the amount of the difference between the genius of Shakespeare and that of Sir Walter Scott. It is the difference between *originality* and the want of it, between writing and transcribing. Almost all the finest scenes and touches, the great master strokes, in Shakespeare are such as must have belonged to the class of invention, where the secret lay between him and his own heart, and the power exerted is in adding to the given materials and working something out of them. In the author of *Waverley*, not all, but the principal and characteristic beauties are such as may and do belong to the class of compilation,—that is, consist in bringing the materials together and leaving them to produce their own effect. Sir Walter Scott is much such a writer as the Duke of Wellington is a general (I am profaning a number of great names in this article by unequal comparisons). The one gets a hundred thousand men together, and wisely leaves it to them to fight out the battle, for if he meddled with it he might spoil sport; the other gets an innumerable quantity of facts together,

³ A record of criminals confined in Newgate Prison.

and lets them tell their own story, as best they may. The facts are stubborn in the last instance as the men are in the first, and in neither case is the broth spoiled by the cook. This abstinence from interfering with their resources, lest they should defeat their own success, shows great modesty and self-knowledge in the compiler of romances and the leader of armies, but little boldness or inventiveness of genius. We begin to measure Shakespeare's height from the superstructure of passion and fancy he has raised out of his subject and story, on which, too, rests the triumphal arch of his fame; if we were to take away the subject and story, the portrait and history, from the Scotch Novels, no great deal would be left worth talking about.

No one admires or delights in the Scotch Novels more than I do; but at the same time when I hear it asserted that his mind is of the same class with Shakespeare's, or that he imitates nature in the same way, I confess I cannot assent to it. No two things appear to me more different. Sir Walter is an imitator of nature and nothing more; but I think Shakespeare is infinitely more than this. The creative principle is everywhere restless and redundant in Shakespeare, both as it relates to the invention of feeling and imagery; in the author of *Waverley* it lies for the most part dormant, sluggish, and unused. Sir Walter's mind is full of information, but the "o'erinforming power" is not there. Shakespeare's spirit, like fire, shines through him: Sir Walter's, like a stream, reflects surrounding objects. It is true he has shifted the scene from Scotland into England and France, and the manners and characters are strikingly English and French; but this does not prove that they are not local, and that they are not borrowed, as well as the scenery and the costume, from comparatively obvious and mechanical sources. Nobody from reading Shakespeare would know (except from the *dramatis personæ*) that Lear was an English king. He is merely a king and a father. The ground is common: but what a well of tears has he dug out of it! The tradition is nothing, or a foolish one. There are no data in history to go upon; no advantage is taken of costume, no acquaintance with geography or architecture or dialect is necessary: but

there is an old tradition, human nature—an old temple, the human mind—and Shakespeare walks into it and looks about him with a lordly eye, and seizes on the sacred spoils as his own. The story is a thousand or two years old, and yet the tragedy has no smack of antiquarianism in it. I should like very well to see Sir Walter giving us a tragedy of this kind, a huge “globose” of sorrow, swinging round in mid-air, independent of time, place, or circumstance, sustained by its own weight and motion, and not propped up by the levers of custom, or patched up with quaint, old-fashioned dresses, or set off by grotesque backgrounds or rusty armor, but in which the mere paraphernalia and accessories were left out of the question, and nothing but the soul of passion and the pith of imagination was to be found. “A dukedom to a beggarly denier,” he would make nothing of it. Does this prove he has done nothing, or that he had not done the greatest things? No, but that he is not like Shakespeare. For instance, when Lear says, “The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanche, and Sweetheart, see they bark at me!”⁴ there is no old chronicle of the line of Brute, no black-letter broadside, no tattered ballad, no vague rumor, in which this exclamation is registered; there is nothing romantic, quaint, mysterious in the objects introduced: the illustration is borrowed from the commonest and most casual images in nature, and yet it is this very circumstance that lends its extreme force to the expression of his grief by showing that even the lowest things in creation, and the last you would think of, had in his imagination turned against him. All nature was, as he supposed, in a conspiracy against him, and the most trivial and insignificant creatures concerned in it were the most striking proofs of its malignity and extent. It is the depth of passion, however, or of the poet’s sympathy with it, that distinguished this character of torturing familiarity in them, invests them with corresponding importance, and suggests them by the force of contrast. It is not that certain images are surcharged with a prescriptive influence over the imagination from known and existing prejudices, so that to approach or even men-

⁴ *King Lear*, III, vi, 65. Compare page 226.

tion them is sure to excite a pleasing awe and horror in the mind (the effect in this case is mostly mechanical),—the whole sublimity of the passage is from the weight of passion thrown into it, and this is the poet's own doing. This is not trick, but genius. Meg Mirrilies on her death-bed says, "Lay my head to the East!"⁵ Nothing can be finer or more thrilling than this in its way; but the author has little to do with it. It is an Oriental superstition; it is a proverbial expression; it is part of the gibberish (sublime though it be) of her gypsy clan! "Nothing but his unkind daughters could have brought him to this pass."⁶ This is not a cant phrase, nor the fragment of an old legend, nor a mysterious spell, nor the butt-end of a wizard's denunciation. It is the mere natural ebullition of passion, urged nearly to madness, and that will admit no other cause of dire misfortune but its own, which swallows up all other griefs. The force of despair hurries the imagination over the boundary of fact and common sense, and renders the transition sublime; but there is no precedent or authority for it, except in the general nature of the human mind. I think, but am not sure, that Sir Walter Scott has imitated this turn of reflection, by making Madge Wildfire⁷ ascribe Jenny Deans's uneasiness to the loss of her baby, which had unsettled her brain. Again, Lear calls on the Heavens to take his part, for "they are old like him."⁸ Here there is nothing to prop up the image but the strength of passion, confounding the infirmity of age with the stability of the firmament, and equaling the complainant, through the sense of suffering and wrong, with the majesty of the Highest. This finding out a parallel between the most unlike objects, because the individual would wish to find one to support the sense of his own misery and helplessness, is truly Shakespearean; it is an instinctive law of our nature, and the genuine inspiration of the Muse. Racine (but let me not anticipate) would make him pour out three hundred verses of lamentation for his

⁵ *Guy Mannering*, chapter 55. But Meg said, "The feet to the East."

⁶ *King Lear*, III, iv, 65; but inaccurately quoted. Compare Coleridge, page 101.

⁷ A mad character in *The Heart of Midlothian*.

⁸ II, iv, 194.

loss of kingdom, his feebleness, and his old age, coming to the same conclusion at the end of every third couplet, instead of making him grasp at once at the Heavens for support. The witches in *Macbeth* are traditional, preternatural personages; and there Sir Walter would have left them, after making what use of them he pleased as a sort of Gothic machinery. Shakespeare makes something more of them, and adds to the mystery by explaining it:

The earth hath bubbles as the water hath,
And these are of them.⁹

We have their physiognomy too:

And enjoin'd silence,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lip.¹⁰

And the mode of their disappearance is thus described:

And then they melted into thin air.¹¹

What an idea is here conveyed of silence and vacancy! The geese of Micklestane Muir (the countrywoman and her flock of geese turned into stone) in *The Black Dwarf* are a fine and petrifying metamorphosis; but it is the tradition of the country and no more. Sir Walter has told us nothing farther of it than the first clown whom we might ask concerning it. I do not blame him for that, though I cannot give him credit for what he has not done. The poetry of a novel is a *fixture* of the spot. Meg Mirrilies I also allow, with all possible good-will, to be a most romantic and astounding personage; yet she is a little melodramatic. Her exits and entrances are pantomimic, and her long red cloak, her elf-locks, the rock on which she stands, and the white cloud behind her, are or might be made the property of a theater. Shakespeare's witches are nearly exploded on the stage. Their broomsticks

⁹ *Macbeth*, I, iii, 79.

¹⁰ I, iii, 44; only the second and third lines are Shakespeare's.

¹¹ Hazlitt confuses line 81 ("Into the air") with *The Tempest*, IV, i, 150.

are left; their metaphysics are gone, buried five editions deep in Captain Medwin's *Conversations*!¹² The passion of *Othello* is made out of nothing but itself; there is no external machinery to help it on; its highest intermediate agent is an old-fashioned pocket handkerchief. Yet "there's magic in the web" of thoughts and feelings, done after the commonest pattern of human life. The power displayed in it is that of intense passion and powerful intellect, wielding every-day events, and imparting its force to them, not swayed or carried along by them as in a go-cart. The splendor is that of genius darting out its forked flame on whatever comes in its way, and kindling or melting it in the furnace of affection, whether it be flax or iron. The coloring, the form, the motion, the combination of objects depend on the predisposition of the mind, molding nature to its own purposes; in Sir Walter the mind is as wax to circumstances, and owns no other impress. Shakespeare is a half-worker with nature. Sir Walter is like a man who has got a romantic spinning-jenny, which he has only to set a-going, and it does his work for him much better and faster than he can do it for himself. He lays an embargo on "all appliances and means to boot," on history, tradition, local scenery, costume and manners, and makes his characters chiefly up of these. Shakespeare seizes only on the ruling passion, and miraculously evolves all the rest from it. The eagerness of desire suggests every possible event that can irritate or thwart it, foresees all obstacles, catches at every trifle, clothes itself with imagination and tantalizes itself with hope; "sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt," starts at a phantom, and makes the universe tributary to it, and the plaything of its fancy. There is none of this overweening importunity of the imagination in the author of *Waverley*; he does his work well, but in another-guess manner. His imagination is a matter-of-fact imagination. To return to *Othello*. Take the celebrated dialogue in the third act. "'Tis common." There is nothing but the writhings and contortings of the heart, probed by affliction's point, as the flesh shrinks under the surgeon's knife. All its starts and flaws are but the conflicts and misgiv-

¹² Thomas Medwin's *Conversations with Lord Byron*, 1824, a book which ran into several editions.

ings of hope and fear, in the most ordinary but trying circumstances. The "Not a jot, not a jot"¹³ has nothing to do with any old legend or prophecy. It is only the last poor effort of human hope, taking refuge on the lips. When, after being infected with jealousy by Iago, he retires apparently comforted and resigned, and then, without anything having happened in the interim, returns stung to madness, crowned with his wrongs, and raging for revenge, the effect is like that of poison inflaming the blood, or like fire inclosed in a furnace. The sole principle of invention is the sympathy with the natural revulsion of the human mind, and its involuntary transition from false security to uncontrollable fury. The springs of mental passion are fretted and wrought to madness, and produce this explosion in the poet's breast. So when Othello swears "By yon *marble* heaven," the epithet is suggested by the hardness of his heart from the sense of injury: the texture of the outward object is borrowed from that of the thoughts; and that noble simile, "Like the Propontic," etc.,¹⁴ seems only an echo of the sounding tide of passion, and to roll from the same source, the heart. The dialogue between Hubert and Arthur,¹⁵ and that between Brutus and Cassius,¹⁶ are among the finest illustrations of the same principle, which indeed is everywhere predominant (perhaps to a fault) in Shakespeare. His genius is like the Nile overflowing and enriching its banks; that of Sir Walter is like a mountain stream rendered interesting by the picturesqueness of the surrounding scenery. Shakespeare produces his most striking dramatic effects out of the workings of the finest and most intense passions; Sir Walter places his *dramatis personæ* in romantic situations, and subjects them to extraordinary occurrences, and narrates the results. The one gives us what we see and hear, the other what we *are*. Hamlet is not a person whose nativity is cast, or whose death is foretold by portents: he weaves the web of his destiny out of his own thoughts, and a very quaint and singular one it is. We have, I think, a stronger fellow-

¹³ III, iii, 215.

¹⁴ See p. 227.

¹⁵ *King John*, IV, 1.

¹⁶ *Julius Cæsar*, I, ii or IV, iii.

feeling with him that we have with Bertram¹⁷ or Waverley. All men feel and think, more or less; but we are not all foundlings, Jacobites, or astrologers. We might have been overturned with these gentlemen in a stage-coach; we seem to have been schoolfellows with Hamlet at Wittenberg.

I will not press this argument further, lest I should make it tedious, and run into questions I have no intention to meddle with. All I mean to insist upon is, that Sir Walter's *forte* is in the richness and variety of his materials, and Shakespeare's in the working them up. Sir Walter is distinguished by the most amazing retentiveness of memory, and vividness of conception of what would happen, be seen, and felt by everybody in given circumstances; as Shakespeare is by inventiveness of genius, by a faculty of tracing and unfolding the most hidden yet powerful springs of action, scarce recognized by ourselves, and by an endless and felicitous range of poetical illustration, added to a wide scope of reading and of knowledge. One proof of the justice of these remarks is that, whenever Sir Walter comes to a truly dramatic situation, he declines it or fails. Thus in *The Black Dwarf*, all that relates to the traditions respecting this mysterious personage, to the superstitious stories founded on it, is admirably done and to the life, with all the spirit and freedom of originality; but when he comes to the last scene, for which all the rest is a preparation, and which is full of the highest interest and passion, nothing is done; instead of an address from Sir Edward Mauley, recounting the miseries of his whole life, and withering up his guilty rival with the recital, the Dwarf enters with a strange rustling noise, the opposite doors fly open, and the affrighted spectators rush out like the figures in a pantomime. This is not dramatic, but melodramatic. There is a palpable disappointment and falling off, where the interest had been worked up to the highest pitch of expectation. The gratifying of this appalling curiosity and interest was all that was not done to Sir Walter's hand; and this he has failed to do. All that was known *about* the Black Dwarf, his figure, his

¹⁷ In *Guy Mannering*.

desolate habitation, his unaccountable way of life, his wrongs, his bitter execrations against intruders on his privacy, the floating and exaggerated accounts of him, all these are given with a masterly and faithful hand; this is matter of description and narrative: but when the true imaginative and dramatic part comes, when the subject of this dramatic tale is to pour out the accumulated and agonizing effects of all his series of wretchedness and torture upon his own mind, that is, when the person is to speak from himself and to stun us with the recoil of passion upon external agents or circumstances that have caused it, we find that it is Sir Walter Scott and not Shakespeare that is his counsel-keeper, that the author is a novelist and not a poet. All that is gossiped in the neighborhood, all that is handed down in print, all of which a drawing or an etching might be procured, is gathered together and communicated to the public: what the heart whispers to itself in secret, what the imagination tells in thunder, this alone is wanting, and this is the great thing required to make good the comparison in question. Sir Walter has not, then, imitated Shakespeare, but he has given us nature, such as he found and could best describe it; and he resembles him only in this, that he thinks of his characters and never of himself, and pours out his works with such unconscious ease and prodigality of resources that he thinks nothing of them, and is even greater than his own fame.

The genius of Shakespeare is dramatic, that of Scott narrative or descriptive, that of Racine is didactic. He gives, as I conceive, the *commonplaces* of the human heart better than any one, but nothing or very little more. He enlarges on a set of obvious sentiments and well-known topics with considerable elegance of language and copiousness of declamation, but there is scarcely one stroke of original genius, nor anything like imagination, in his writings. He strings together a number of moral reflections, and, instead of reciting them himself, puts them into the mouths of his *dramatis personæ*, who talk well about their own situations and the general relations of human life. Instead of laying bare the heart of the sufferer with all its bleeding wounds and palpitating fibers, he puts into his hand a commonplace-book, and he reads

us a lecture from this. This is not the essence of the drama, whose object and privilege it is to give us the extreme and subtle workings of the human mind in individual circumstances, to make us sympathize with the sufferer, or feel as we should feel in his circumstances, not to tell the indifferent spectator what the indifferent spectator could just as well tell him. Tragedy is human nature tried in the crucible of affliction, not exhibited in the vague theorems of speculation. The poet's pen that paints all this in words of fire and images of gold is totally wanting in Racine. He gives neither external images nor the internal and secret workings of the human breast. Sir Walter Scott gives the external imagery or machinery of passion; Shakespeare the soul; and Racine the moral or argument of it. The French object to Shakespeare for his breach of the unities, and hold up Racine as a model of classical propriety, who makes a Greek hero address a Grecian heroine as *Madame*.¹⁸ Yet this is not barbarous—Why? Because it is French, and because nothing that is French can be barbarous in the eyes of this frivolous and pedantic nation, who would prefer a peruke of the age of Louis XIV to a simple Greek head-dress!

LETTER TO JOHN MURRAY, ESQ., ON THE REV.
W. L. BOWLES'S STRICTURES ON THE LIFE
AND WRITINGS OF POPE

LORD BYRON

[In 1806 Rev. W. L. Bowles edited the Works of Pope, and in his critical apparatus discussed both the character and the poetical standing of Pope somewhat unfavorably. To this Thomas Campbell replied in his *Essay on English Poetry*, prefixed to his *Specimens of the British Poets*, 1819; and Bowles rejoined in an open letter to Campbell (of the same year), entitled *Invariable Principles of Poetry*. Some incidental men-

¹⁸ An example unfortunately chosen for Hazlitt's purpose, since it rather exemplifies Racine's indifference to historic detail,—his method of presenting tragic characters independent of any particular time or place.

tion of the name of Byron gave the latter an excuse for entering the controversy in an open letter addressed to his publisher, Murray, published 1821. Once more Bowles retorted in *Two Letters to the Right Honourable Lord Byron* (1821). A second letter of Byron's remained unpublished till 1835. Other pamphleteers took part in the controversy, some being interested primarily in Bowles's curious theory of the nature of the "poetic," others in the questions raised respecting Pope's personal character. The present selection from Byron's letter of 1821 includes that portion having to do with poetic theory. Bowles's view may be represented summarily by the following paragraphs from his original discussion in his edition of Pope, as reprinted by him in his *Letters to Lord Byron*:

"I presume it will readily be granted that all images drawn from what is beautiful or sublime in the works of Nature are more beautiful and sublime than any images drawn from art, and that they are therefore, *per se*, more poetical.

"In like manner those passions of the human heart which belong to Nature in general are, *per se*, more adapted to the higher species of poetry than those which are derived from incidental and transient manners. A description of a forest is more poetical than a description of a cultivated garden; and the passions which are portrayed in the Epistle of an Eloisa¹ render such a poem more poetical (whatever might be the difference of merit in point of execution), intrinsically more poetical, than a poem founded on the characters, incidents, and modes of artificial life,—for instance, *The Rape of the Lock*. If this be admitted, the rule by which we would estimate Pope's general poetical character would be obvious.

"Let me not, however, be considered as thinking that the subject alone constitutes poetical excellency. The execution is to be taken into consideration at the same time; for, with Lord Harvey, we might fall asleep over the *Creation* of Blackmore,² but be alive to the touches of animation and satire in Boileau. The subject and the execution, therefore, are equally to be considered; the one respecting the poetry, the other, the art and powers of the poet. The poetical subject and the art and talents of the poet should always be kept in mind; and I imagine it is for want of observing this rule, that so much has been said, and so little understood, of the real ground of Pope's character as a poet. If you say he is not one of the first poets that England, and the polished literature of a polished era, can boast,

¹ Pope's poetic epistle, "Eloisa to Abelard," was published 1717.

² Sir Richard Blackmore, whose poem *Creation* appeared in 1712.

Recte necne crocos floresque perambulat Atti
 Fabula si dubitem, clamant perisse pudorem
 Cuncti pene patres.³

If you say that he stands preëminent, in the highest sense, you must deny the principles of criticism, which I imagine will be acknowledged by all.

"In speaking of the poetical subject and the powers of execution: with regard to the first, Pope cannot be classed among the highest orders of poets; with regard to the second, none ever was his superior. It is futile to expect to judge of one composition by the rules of another. To say that Pope, in this sense, is not a poet, is to say that a didactic poem is not a tragedy, and that a satire is not an ode. Pope must be judged according to the rank in which he stands, among those whose delineations are taken more from manners than from Nature. When I say that this is his predominant character, I must be insensible to everything exquisite in poetry, if I did not except, *instantly*, the 'Epistle of Eloisa': but this can only be considered according to its class; and if I say that it seems to me superior to any other of the kind, to which it might fairly be compared, such as the Epistles of Ovid, Propertius, Tibullus (I will not mention Drayton, and Pope's numerous subsequent imitations)⁴; but when this transcendent poem is compared with those which will bear the comparison, I shall not be deemed as giving reluctant praise, when I declare my conviction of its being infinitely superior to everything of the kind, ancient or modern. In this poem, therefore, Pope appears on the high ground of the poet of Nature; but this certainly is not his general character.

"If the premises laid down in the commencement of these reflections be true, no one can stand preëminent as a great descriptive poet unless he have an eye attentive to and familiar with every external appearance that [Nature] may exhibit, in every change of season, every variation of light and shade. He who has not an eye to observe these, and who cannot with a glance distinguish every diversity of every hue in her variety of beauties, must so far be deficient in one of the essential qualities of a poet. Here Pope, from infirmities and from physical causes, was particularly deficient. When he left his own laural circus at Twickenham, he was lifted into his chariot or his barge; and with weak eyes, and tottering

³ "If I doubt whether it is rightly or not that a play of Atta's moves among perfumes and flowers (i. e., is flatteringly received), almost all the old men would cry out that modesty has perished." (Horace, Epistles, II, i, 79-81.)

⁴ Drayton published *Heroical Epistles*, imaginatively attributed to historic persons, and Pope various Epistles to his friends.

strength, it is physically impossible he could be a descriptive bard. Where description has been introduced among his poems, as far as his observation could go, he excelled; more could not be expected. In the descriptions of the cloister, the scenes surrounding the melancholy convent, as far as could be gained by books, suggested by imagination, he was eminently successful; but even here, perhaps, he only proved that he could not go far; and

The streams that shine between the hills,
The grotts that echo to the tinkling rills,

were possibly transcripts of what he could most easily transcribe,—his own views and scenery. But how different, how minute is his description, when he describes what he is master of; for instance, the game of ombre, in *The Rape of the Lock*! This is from artificial life; and with artificial life, from his infirmities, he must have been chiefly conversant. But if he had been gifted with the same powers of observing outward Nature, I have no doubt he would have evinced as much accuracy in describing the appropriate and peculiar beauties, such as Nature exhibits in the Forest where he lived, as he was able to describe, in a manner so novel, and with colours so vivid, a game of cards. It is for this reason that his *Windsor Forest* and his pastorals must ever appear so defective to a lover of Nature. Pope, therefore, wisely left this part of his art, which Thomson, and many other poets since his time, have cultivated with so much more success, and turned to what he calls the 'moral' of the song.⁵ I need not go regularly over his works; but I think they may be generally divided under the heads I have mentioned: Pathetic, Sublime, Descriptive, Moral, and Satirical. In the pathetic, poetically considered, he stands highest; in the sublime he is deficient; in descriptions from Nature, for reasons given, still more so. He therefore pursued that path in poetry which was more congenial to his powers, and in which he has shone without a rival."]

. . . I now come to Mr. Bowles's "invariable principles of poetry." These Mr. Bowles and some of his correspondents pronounce "unanswerable"; and they are "unanswered," at least by Campbell, who seems to have been astounded at the title. The sultan of the time being offered to ally himself to a king of France because "he hated the word league"; which proves that the Padishah

⁵ See p. 268.

understood French. Mr. Campbell has no need of my alliance, nor shall I presume to offer it; but I do hate that word "invariable." What is there of *human*, be it poetry, philosophy, wit, wisdom, science, power, glory, mind, matter, life, or death, which is "invariable"? Of course I put things divine out of the question. Of all arrogant baptisms of a book, this title to a pamphlet appears the most complacently conceited. It is Mr. Campbell's part to answer the contents of this performance, and especially to vindicate his own "ship," which Mr. Bowles most triumphantly proclaims to have struck to his very first fire:

Quoth he, There was a *ship*;
Now let me go, thou grey-hair'd loon,
Or my staff shall make thee skip.¹

It is no affair of mine, but having once begun (certainly not by my own wish, but called upon by the frequent recurrence to my name in the pamphlets), I am like an Irishman in a "row," "anybody's customer." I shall therefore say a word or two on the "ship."

Mr. Bowles asserts that Campbell's "ship of the line" derives all its poetry, not from "art," but from "nature." "Take away the waves, the winds, the sun, etc., etc., one will become a stripe of blue bunting, and the other a piece of coarse canvas on three tall poles." Very true; take away the "waves," "the winds," and there will be no ship at all, not only for poetical, but for any other purpose; and take away "the sun," and we must read Mr. Bowles's pamphlet by candle-light. But the "poetry" of the "ship" does *not* depend on "the waves," etc.; on the contrary, the "ship of the line" confers its own poetry upon the waters, and heightens *theirs*. I do not deny that the "waves and winds," and above all "the sun," are highly poetical; we know it to our cost, by the many descriptions of them in verse: but if the waves bore only the foam upon their bosoms, if the winds wafted only the sea-weed to the shore, if the sun shone neither upon pyramids, nor fleets, nor fortresses, would its beams be equally poetical? I think not: the poetry is at least reciprocal. Take away

¹ From "The Ancient Mariner," third stanza, in the original version (which read, however, "Now get thee hence" instead of "Now let me go").

months on shipboard; and, during the whole period of my life abroad, have scarcely ever passed a month out of sight of the ocean: besides being brought up from two years till ten on the brink of it. I recollect, when anchored off Cape Sigæum in 1810, in an English frigate, a violent squall coming on at sunset, so violent as to make us imagine that the ship would part cable, or drive from her anchorage. Mr. Hobhouse and myself, and some officers, had been up the Dardanelles to Abydos, and were just returned in time. The aspect of a storm in the Archipelago is as poetical as need be, the sea being particularly short, dashing, and dangerous, and the navigation intricate and broken by the isles and currents. Cape Sigæum, the tumuli of the Troad, Lemnos, Tenedos, all added to the associations of the time. But what seemed the most "poetical" of all, at the moment, were the numbers (about two hundred) of Greek and Turkish craft, which were obliged to "cut and run" before the wind, from their unsafe anchorage, some for Tenedos, some for other isles, some for the main, and some, it might be, for eternity. The sight of these little scudding vessels, darting over the foam in the twilight, now appearing and now disappearing between the waves in the cloud of night, with their peculiarly white sails (the Levant sails not being of "coarse canvas," but of white cotton) skimming along as quickly, but less safely, than the sea-mews which hovered over them; their evident distress, their reduction to fluttering specks in the distance, their crowded succession, their littleness, as contending with the giant elements which made our stout forty-four's teak timbers (she was built in India) creak

"the ship of the line" "swinging round" the "calm water," and the calm water becomes a somewhat monotonous thing to look at, particularly if not transparently clear; witness the thousands who pass by without looking at it at all. What was it attracted the thousands to the launch? they might have seen the poetical "calm water" at Wapping, or in the London Dock, or in the Paddington Canal, or in a horse-pond, or in a slop-basin, or in any other vase. They might have heard the poetical winds howling through the chinks of a pig-sty, or the garret window; they might have seen the sun shining on a footman's livery, or on a brass warming-pan; but could the "calm water," or the "wind," or the "sun," make all or any of these "poetical"? I think not. Mr. Bowles admits "the ship" to be poetical, but only from these accessories: now if they *confer* poetry so as to make one thing poetical, they would make other things poetical; the more so, as Mr. Bowles calls a "ship of the line" without them,—that is to say, its "masts and sails and streamers,"—"blue bunting," and "coarse canvas," and "tall poles." So they are; and porcelain is clay, and man is dust, and flesh is grass, and yet the two latter at least are the subjects of much poesy.

Did Mr. Bowles ever gaze upon the sea? I presume that he has, at least upon a sea-piece. Did any painter ever paint the sea *only*, without the addition of a ship, boat, wreck, or some such adjunct? Is the sea itself a more attractive, a more moral, a more poetical object, with or without a vessel, breaking its vast but fatiguing monotony? Is a storm more poetical without a ship? or, in the poem of *The Shipwreck*,² is it the storm or the ship which most interests? Both *much* undoubtedly; but without the vessel, what should we care for the tempest? It would sink into mere descriptive poetry, which in itself was never esteemed a high order of that art.

I look upon myself as entitled to talk of naval matters, at least to poets:—with the exception of Walter Scott, Moore, and Southey, perhaps, who have been voyagers, I have *swam* more miles than all the rest of them together now living ever *sailed*, and have lived for months and

² By William Falconer, 1762.

As for the Euxine, I stood upon the Symplegades—I stood by the broken altar still exposed to the winds upon one of them—I felt all the "poetry" of the situation, as I repeated the first lines of *Medea*;³ but would not that "poetry" have been heightened by the *Argo*? It was so even by the appearance of any merchant-vessel arriving from Odessa. But Mr. Bowles says, "Why bring your ship off the stocks?" For no reason that I know except that ships are built to be launched. The water, etc., undoubtedly *heightens* the poetical associations, but it does not *make* them; and the ship amply repays the obligation: they aid each other; the water is more poetical with the ship—the ship less so without the water. But even a ship laid up in dock is a grand and poetical sight. Even an old boat, keel upwards, wrecked upon the barren sand, is a "poetical" object (and Wordsworth, who made a poem about a washing-tub and a blind boy,⁴ may tell you so as well as I), whilst a long extent of sand and unbroken water, without the boat, would be as like dull prose as any pamphlet lately published.

What makes the poetry in the image of the "marble waste of Tadmor," of Grainger's *Ode to Solitude*,⁵ so much admired by Johnson? Is it the "marble" or the "waste," the artificial or the natural object? The "waste" is like all other wastes; but the "marble" of Palmyra makes the poetry of the passage as of the place.

The beautiful but barren Hymettus, the whole coast of Attica, her hills and mountains, Pentelicus, Anchesmus, Philopappus, etc., etc., are in themselves poetical, and would be so if the name of Athens, of Athenians, and her very ruins were swept from the earth. But I am to be

or the rock on which it stands? The columns of Cape Colonna, or the Cape itself? The rocks at the foot of it, or the recollection that Falconer's ship was bulged upon them?⁶ There are a thousand rocks and capes far more picturesque than those of the Acropolis and Cape Sunium, in themselves; what are they to a thousand scenes in the wilder parts of Greece, of Asia Minor, Switzerland, or even of Cintra in Portugal, or to many scenes of Italy, and the Sierras of Spain? But it is the "art," the columns, the temples, the wrecked vessel, which give them their antique and their modern poetry, and not the spots themselves. Without them, the spots of earth would be unnoticed and unknown; buried, like Babylon and Nineveh, in indistinct confusion, without poetry, as without existence; but to whatever spot of earth these ruins were transported, if they were capable of transportation, like the obelisk, and the sphinx, and the Memnon's head, *there* they would still exist in the perfection of their beauty, and in the pride of their poetry. I opposed, and will ever oppose, the robbery of ruins from Athens, to instruct the English in sculpture; but why did I do so? The *ruins* are as poetical in Piccadilly as they were in the Parthenon; but the Parthenon and its rock are less so without them. Such is the poetry of art.

Mr. Bowles contends, again, that the pyramids of Egypt are poetical, because of "the association with boundless deserts," and that a "pyramid of the same dimensions" would not be sublime in "Lincoln's Inn Fields." Not so poetical, certainly; but take away the "pyramids," and what is the "desert"? Take away Stonehenge from Salisbury Plain, and it is nothing more than Hounslow Heath, or any other unenclosed down. It appears to me that St. Peter's, the Coliseum, the Laocoön, the Venus di Medici, the Hercules, the Dying Gladiator, the Moses of Michael Angelo, and all the higher works of Canova (I have already spoken of those of ancient Greece, still extant in that country, or transported to England), are as *poetical* as Mont Blanc or Mont Ætna,—perhaps still more so, as they are direct manifestations of mind, and *pre-*

⁶ In a note on *Childe Harold*, canto ii, stanza 86, Byron wrote: "Colonna has yet an additional interest, as the actual spot of Falconer's Shipwreck."

suppose poetry in their very conception; and have, moreover, as being such, a something of actual life, which cannot belong to any part of inanimate nature, unless we adopt the system of Spinoza, that the world is the Deity. There can be nothing more poetical in its aspect than the city of Venice; does this depend upon the sea, or the canals?—

The dirt and sea-weed whence proud Venice rose?

Is it the canal which runs between the palace and the prison, or the "Bridge of Sighs," which connects them, that renders it poetical? Is it the Canale Grande, or the Rialto which arches it, the churches which tower over it, the palaces which line, and the gondolas which glide over, the waters, that render this city more poetical than Rome itself? Mr. Bowles will say, perhaps, that the Rialto is but marble, the palaces and churches only stone, and the gondolas a "coarse" black cloth, thrown over some planks of carved wood, with a shining bit of fantastically-formed iron at the prow, "without" the water. And I tell him that, without these, the water would be nothing but a clay-colored ditch; and whoever says the contrary deserves to be at the bottom of that where Pope's heroes are embraced by the mad nymphs.⁷ There would be nothing to make the canal of Venice more poetical than that of Paddington, were it not for the artificial adjuncts above mentioned; although it is a perfectly natural canal, formed by the sea and the innumerable islands which constitute the site of this extraordinary city.

The very cloacæ of Tarquin at Rome are as poetical as Richmond Hill; many will think more so: take away Rome, and leave the Tiber and the seven hills, in the nature of Evander's time. Let Mr. Bowles, or Mr. Wordsworth, or Mr. Southey, or any of the other "naturals," make a poem upon them, and then see which is most poetical, their production, or the commonest guide-book, which tells you the road from St. Peter's to the Coliseum, and informs you what you will see by the way. The ground interests in Virgil, because it *will* be Rome, and not because it is Evander's rural domain.

⁷ See *The Dunciad*, II, 332.

Mr. Bowles then proceeds to press Homer into his service, in answer to a remark of Mr. Campbell's, that "Homer was a great describer of works of art." Mr. Bowles contends that all his great power, even in this, depends upon their connection with nature. The "shield of Achilles derives its poetical interest from the subjects described on it." And from what does the *spear* of Achilles derive its interest? and the helmet and the mail worn by Patroclus, and the celestial armor, and the very brazen greaves of the well-booted Greeks? Is it solely from the legs, and the back, and the breast, and the human body, which they enclose? In that case it would have been more poetical to have made them fight naked; and Gully and Gregson,⁸ as being nearer to a state of nature, are more poetical boxing in a pair of drawers than Hector and Achilles in radiant armor and with heroic weapons. Instead of the clash of helmets, and the rushing of chariots, and the whizzing of spears, and the glancing of swords, and the cleaving of shields, and the piercing of breast-plates, why not represent the Greeks and Trojans like two savage tribes, tugging and tearing, and kicking and biting, and gnashing, foaming, grinning, and gouging, in all the poetry of martial nature, unencumbered with gross, prosaic, artificial arms; an equal superfluity to the natural warrior and his natural poet? Is there anything unpoetical in Ulysses striking the horses of Rhesus with *his bow* (having forgotten his thong), or would Mr. Bowles have had him kick them with his foot, or smack them with his hand, as being more unsophisticated?

In Gray's *Elegy*, is there an image more striking than his "shapeless sculpture"?⁹ Of sculpture in general, it may be observed that it is more poetical than nature itself, inasmuch as it represents and bodies forth that ideal beauty and sublimity which is never to be found in actual nature. This, at least, is the general opinion. But, always excepting the Venus di Medicis, I differ from that opinion, at least as far as regards female beauty; for the head of Lady Charlemont (when I first saw her nine years ago) seemed to possess all that sculpture could require for its ideal. I recollect seeing something of the same

⁸ Pugilists.
⁹ Line 79.

kind in the head of an Albanian girl, who was actually employed in mending a road in the mountains, and in some Greek, and one or two Italian, faces. But of *sublimity*, I have never seen anything in human nature at all to approach the expression of sculpture, either in the Apollo, the Moses, or other of the sterner works of ancient or modern art.

Let us examine a little further this "babble of green fields" and of bare nature in general as superior to artificial imagery, for the poetical purposes of the fine arts. In landscape painting, the great artist does not give you a literal copy of a country, but he invents and composes one. Nature, in her actual aspect, does not furnish him with such existing scenes as he requires. Even where he presents you with some famous city, or celebrated scene from mountain or other nature, it must be taken from some particular point of view, and with such light, and shade, and distance, etc., as serve not only to heighten its beauties, but to shadow its deformities. The poetry of nature alone, *exactly* as she appears, is not sufficient to bear him out. The very sky of his painting is not the portrait of the sky of nature; it is a composition of different skies, observed at different times, and not the whole copied from any particular day. And why? Because nature is not lavish of her beauties; they are widely scattered, and occasionally displayed, to be selected with care, and gathered with difficulty.

Of sculpture I have just spoken. It is the great scope of the sculptor to heighten nature into heroic beauty, i.e., in plain English, to surpass his model. When Canova¹⁰ forms a statue, he takes a limb from one, a hand from another, a feature from a third, and a shape, it may be, from a fourth, probably at the same time improving upon all, as the Greek did of old in embodying his Venus.

Ask a portrait-painter to describe his agonies in ac-

¹⁰ An Italian sculptor (1757-1822). This belief regarding the method of artists in representing ideal beauty was widespread; compare Goldsmith, in his essay on "Cultivation of Taste": "The sculptor or statuary composed the various proportions in nature from a great number of different subjects, every individual of which he found imperfect or defective in some one particular, though beautiful in all the rest; and from these observations, corroborated by taste and judgment, he formed an ideal pattern."

commodating the faces, with which nature and his sitters have crowded his painting room, to the principles of his art: with the exception of perhaps ten faces in as many millions, there is not one which he can venture to give without shading much and adding more. Nature, exactly, simply, barely nature, will make no great artist of any kind, and least of all a poet—the most artificial, perhaps, of all artists in his very essence. With regard to natural imagery, the poets are obliged to take some of their best illustrations from *art*. You say that a “fountain is as clear or clearer than *glass*,” to express its beauty:

O fons Bandusiæ, splendidior vitro!¹¹

In the speech of Mark Antony, the body of Cæsar is displayed, but so also is his *mantle*:

You all do know this mantle, etc. . . .

Look! in this place ran Cassius' dagger through.¹²

If the poet had said that Cassius had run his *fist* through the rent of the mantle, it would have had more of Mr. Bowles's “nature” to help it; but the artificial dagger is more poetical than any natural hand without it. In the sublime of sacred poetry, “Who is this that cometh from Edom? with dyed garments from Bozrah?”¹³ would “the comer” be poetical without his “dyed garments”? which strike and startle the spectator, and identify the approaching object.

The mother of Sisera is represented listening for the “wheels of his chariot.”¹⁴ Solomon, in his Songs, compares the nose of his beloved to “a tower,”¹⁵ which to us appears an eastern exaggeration. If he had said that her stature was like that of a “tower's,” it would have been as poetical as if he had compared her to a tree.

The virtuous Marcia towers above her sex¹⁶

¹¹ Horace, *Odes*, iii, 13, 1.

¹² *Julius Cæsar*, III, ii, 174, 178.

¹³ *Isaiah* 63:1.

¹⁴ *Judges* 5:28.

¹⁵ *Song of Songs*, 7:4.

¹⁶ Addison, *Cato*, I, iv.

is an instance of an artificial image to express a *moral* superiority. But Solomon, it is probable, did not compare his beloved's nose to a "tower" on account of its length, but of its symmetry; and making allowance for eastern hyperbole, and the difficulty of finding a discreet image for a female nose in nature, it is perhaps as good a figure as any other.

Art is *not* inferior to nature for poetical purposes. What makes a regiment of soldiers a more noble object of view than the same mass of mob? Their arms, their dresses, their banners, and the *art* and artificial symmetry of their position and movements. A Highlander's plaid, a Mussulman's turban, and a Roman toga, are more poetical than the tattooed or untattooed buttocks of a New Sandwich savage, although they were described by William Wordsworth himself like the "idiot in his glory."¹⁷

I have seen as many mountains as most men, and more fleets than the generality of landmen; and to my mind a large convoy, with a few sail of the line to conduct them, is as noble and as poetical a prospect as all that inanimate nature can produce. I prefer the "mast of some great admiral," with all its tackle, to the Scotch fir or the alpine tannen, and think that more poetry has been made out of it. In what does the infinite superiority of Falconer's *Shipwreck* over all other shipwrecks consist? In his admirable application of the terms of his art; in a poet-sailor's description of the sailor's fate. These very terms, by his application, make the strength and reality of his poem. Why? Because he was a poet; and, in the hands of a poet, art will not be found less ornamental than nature. It is precisely in general nature, and in stepping out of his element, that Falconer fails; where he digresses to speak of ancient Greece, and "such branches of learning."

In Dyer's *Grongar Hill*,¹⁸ upon which his fame rests, the very appearance of nature herself is moralized into an artificial image:

Thus is nature's *vesture* wrought,
To instruct our wandering thought;

¹⁷ At the close of Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy" is the line, "Thus answered Johnny in his glory."

¹⁸ By John Dyer, 1727.

Thus she *dresses green and gay*,
To disperse our cares away.

And here also we have the telescope; the misuse of which, by Milton,¹⁹ has rendered Mr. Bowles so triumphant over Mr. Campbell:

So we mistake the future's face,
Eyed through Hope's deluding glass.

And here a word, *en passant*, to Mr. Campbell:

As yon summits, soft and fair,
Clad in colours of the air,
Which to those who journey near
Barren, brown, and rough appear,
Still we tread the same coarse way—
The present 's still a cloudy day.

Is not this the original of the far-famed—

'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view,
And robes the mountain in its azure hue?²⁰

To return, once more, to the sea. Let any one look on the long wall of Malamocco, which curbs the Adriatic, and pronounce between the sea and its master. Surely that Roman work (I mean Roman in conception and performance) which says to the ocean, "Thus far shalt thou come, and no further," and is obeyed, is not less sublime and poetical than the angry waves which vainly break beneath it.

Mr. Bowles makes the chief part of a ship's poesy depend upon the "wind": then why is a ship under sail more poetical than a hog in a high wind? The hog is all nature, the ship is all art, "coarse canvas," "blue bunting," and "tall poles"; both are violently acted upon by the wind, tossed here and there, to and fro: and yet noth-

¹⁹ See *Paradise Lost*, i, 287-91:

Like the moon, whose orb
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views
At evening, from the top of Fesole,
Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,
Rivers, or mountains, in her spotty globe.

²⁰ From Campbell's *The Pleasures of Hope*, i, 7.

ing but excess of hunger could make me look upon the pig as the more poetical of the two, and then only in the shape of a griskin.

Will Mr. Bowles tell us that the poetry of an aqueduct consists in the water which it conveys? Let him look on that of Justinian, on those of Rome, Constantinople, Lisbon, and Elvas, or even at the remains of that in Attica.

We are asked, "What makes the venerable towers of Westminster Abbey more poetical, as objects, than the tower for the manufactory of patent shot, surrounded by the same scenery?" I will answer—the *architecture*. Turn Westminster Abbey, or Saint Paul's, into a powder-magazine,—their poetry, as objects, remains the same; the Parthenon was actually converted into one by the Turks, during Morosini's Venetian siege, and part of it destroyed in consequence. Cromwell's dragoons stalled their steeds in Worcester cathedral; was it less poetical as an object than before? Ask a foreigner, on his approach to London, what strikes him as the most poetical of the towers before him: he will point out Saint Paul's and Westminster Abbey, without, perhaps, knowing the names or associations of either, and pass over the "tower for patent shot,"—not that, for anything he knows to the contrary, it might not be the mausoleum of a monarch, or a Waterloo column, or a Trafalgar monument, but because its architecture is obviously inferior.

To the question, "Whether the description of a game of cards be as poetical, supposing the execution of the artists equal, as a description of a walk in a forest?" it may be answered that the *materials* are certainly not equal, but that "the artist" who has rendered the "game of cards poetical" is *by far the greater* of the two. But all this "ordering" of poets is purely arbitrary on the part of Mr. Bowles. There may or may not be, in fact, different "orders" of poetry, but the poet is always ranked according to his execution, and not according to his branch of the art.

Tragedy is one of the highest presumed orders. Hughes has written a tragedy, and a very successful one; Fenton another,²¹ and Pope none. Did any man, however,

²¹ Hughes wrote *The Siege of Damascus*, 1720; Fenton *Mariamne*, 1723.

—will even Mr. Bowles himself,—rank Hughes and Fenton as poets above Pope? Was even Addison (the author of *Cato*), or Rowe (one of the higher order of dramatists, as far as success goes), or Young, or even Otway and Southerne, ever raised for a moment to the same rank with Pope in the estimation of the reader or the critic, before his death or since? If Mr. Bowles will contend for classifications of this kind, let him recollect that descriptive poetry has been ranked as among the lowest branches of the art, and description as a mere ornament, but which should never form the “subject” of a poem. The Italians, with the most poetical language and the most fastidious taste in Europe, possess now five *great* poets, they say,—Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, and lastly Alfieri;²² and whom do they esteem one of the highest of these, and some of them the very highest? Petrarch the *sonneteer*. It is true that some of his *canzoni* are not less esteemed, but not more; who ever dreams of his Latin *Africa*?

Were Petrarch to be ranked according to the “order”

²² Of these there is one ranked with the others for his Sonnets, and two for compositions which belong to no class at all. Where is Dante? His poem is not an *epic*; then what is it? He himself calls it a “divine comedy”; and why? This is more than all his thousand commentators have been able to explain. Ariosto’s is not an epic poem; and if poets are to be classed according to the *genus* of their poetry, where is he to be placed? Of these five, Tasso and Alfieri only come within Aristotle’s arrangement and Mr. Bowles’s class-book. But the whole position is false. Poets are classed by the power of their performance, and not according to its rank in a gradus. In the contrary case, the forgotten epic poets of all countries would rank above Petrarch, Dante, Ariosto, Burns, Gray, Dryden, and the highest names of various countries. Mr. Bowles’s title of “*invariable* principles of poetry” is, perhaps, the most arrogant ever prefixed to a volume. So far are the principles of poetry from being “invariable,” that they never were nor ever will be settled. These “principles” mean nothing more than the predilections of a particular age; and every age has its own, and a different from its predecessor. It is now Homer, and now Virgil; once Dryden, and since Walter Scott; now Corneille, and now Racine; now Crébillon, now Voltaire. The Homerists and Virgilians in France disputed for half a century. Not fifty years ago the Italians neglected Dante—Bettinelli reproved Monti for reading “that barbarian”; at present they adore him. Shakespeare and Milton have had their rise, and they will have their decline. Already they have more than once fluctuated, as must be the case with all the dramatists and poets of a living language. This does not depend upon their merits, but upon the ordinary vicissitudes of human opinions. Schlegel and Madame de Staël have endeavored also to reduce poetry to two systems, classical and romantic. The effect is only beginning. [Byron’s note.]

of his compositions, where would the best of sonnets place him? With Dante and the others? No; but, as I have before said, the poet who *executes* best is the highest, whatever his department, and will ever be so rated in the world's esteem.

Had Gray written nothing but his *Elegy*, high as he stands, I am not sure that he would not stand higher; it is the corner-stone of his glory: without it his odes would be insufficient for his fame. The depreciation of Pope is partly founded upon a false idea of the dignity of his order of poetry, to which he has partly contributed by the ingenuous boast:

That not in fancy's maze he wander'd long,
But stoop'd to truth, and moraliz'd his song.²³

He should have written "rose to truth." In my mind, the highest of all poetry is ethical poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth. Religion does not make a part of my subject; it is something beyond human powers, and has failed in all human hands, except Milton's and Dante's: and even Dante's powers are involved in his delineation of human passions, though in supernatural circumstances. What made Socrates the greatest of men? His moral truth—his ethics. What proved Jesus Christ the Son of God hardly less than his miracles? His moral precepts. And if ethics have made a philosopher the first of men, and have not been disdained as an adjunct to his Gospel by the Deity himself, are we to be told that ethical poetry, or didactic poetry, or by whatever name you term it, whose object is to make men better and wiser, is not the *very first order* of poetry? and are we to be told this, too, by one of the priesthood? It requires more mind, more wisdom, more power, than all the "forests" that ever were "walked" for their "description," and all the epics that ever were founded upon fields of battle. The *Georgics* are indisputably, and I believe undisputedly, even a finer poem than the *Æneid*. Virgil knew this; he did not order *them* to be burnt.²⁴

²³ "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," lines 340-41.

²⁴ Virgil was said to have expressed a wish, during his last illness, that the *Æneid* should be destroyed, since he had not been able to perfect its workmanship.

The proper study of mankind is man.²⁵

It is the fashion of the day to lay great stress upon what they call "imagination" and "invention," the two commonest of qualities: an Irish peasant with a little whiskey in his head will imagine and invent more than would furnish forth a modern poem. If Lucretius had not been spoiled by the Epicurean system, we should have had a far superior poem to any now in existence. As mere poetry, it is the first of Latin poems. What then has ruined it? His ethics. Pope has not this defect; his moral is as pure as his poetry is glorious. . . .

Mr. Bowles compares, when and where he can, Pope with Cowper (the same Cowper whom in his edition of Pope he laughs at for his attachment to an old woman, Mrs. Unwin; search and you will find it; I remember the passage, though not the page); in particular he requotes Cowper's Dutch delineation of a wood, drawn up, like a seedman's catalogue,²⁶ with an affected imitation of

²⁵ Pope, *Essay on Man*, ii, 2.

²⁶ I will submit to Mr. Bowles's own judgment a passage from another poem of Cowper's, to be compared with the same writer's "Sylvan Sampler." In the lines "To Mary"—

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disused, and shine no more,

My Mary,
contain a simple, household, "indoor," artificial, and ordinary image. I refer Mr. Bowles to the stanza, and ask if these three lines about "needles" are not worth all the boasted twaddling about trees, so triumphantly requoted? And yet, in fact, what do they convey? A homely collection of images and ideas, associated with the darning of stockings, and the hemming of shirts, and the mending of breeches; but will any one deny that they are eminently poetical and pathetic, as addressed by Cowper to his nurse? The trash of trees reminds me of a saying of Sheridan's. Soon after the *Rejected Address* scene in 1812, I met Sheridan. In the course of dinner he said, "Lord Byron, did you know that amongst the writers of addresses was Whitbread himself?" I answered by an inquiry of what sort of an address he had made. "Of that," replied Sheridan, "I remember little, except that there was a phoenix in it." "A phoenix! Well, how did he describe it?" "Like a poulterer," answered Sheridan: "It was green, and yellow, and red, and blue; he did not let us off for a single feather." And just such as this poulterer's account of a phoenix is Cowper's stick-picker's detail of a wood, with all its petty minutiae of this, that, and the other.

One more poetical instance of the power of art, and even its superiority over nature, in poetry, and I have done:—the bust of Antinous! Is there anything in nature like this marble, excepting the Venus? Can there be more poetry gathered into existence than in that wonderful creation of perfect beauty? But the

Milton's style, as burlesque as *The Splendid Shilling*.²⁷ These two writers—for Cowper is no poet—come into comparison in one great work, the translation of Homer. Now, with all the great, and manifest, and manifold, and reproved, and acknowledged, and uncontroverted faults of Pope's translation, and all the scholarship, and pains, and time, and trouble, and blank verse of the other, who can ever read Cowper? And who will ever lay down Pope, unless for the original? Pope's was "not Homer, it was Spondanus";²⁸ but Cowper's is not Homer either, it is not even Cowper. As a child I first read Pope's Homer with a rapture which no subsequent work could ever afford, and children are not the worst judges of their own language. As a boy I read Homer in the original, as we have all done, some of us by force, and a few by favor; under which description I come is nothing to the purpose,—it is enough that I read him. As a man I have tried to read Cowper's version, and I found it impossible. Has any human reader ever succeeded? . . .

The attempt of the poetical populace of the present day to obtain an ostracism against Pope is as easily accounted for as the Athenian's shell against Aristides: they are tired of hearing him always called the "Just." They are also fighting for life; for, if he maintains his station, they will reach their own by falling. They have raised a mosque by the side of a Grecian temple of the purest architecture; and, more barbarous than the barbarians from whose practice I have borrowed the figure, they are not contented with their own grotesque edifice, unless they destroy the prior and purely beautiful fabric

poetry of this bust is in no respect derived from nature, nor from any association of moral exaltedness; for what is there in common with moral nature and the male minion of Adrian? The very execution is not natural, but *super-natural*, or rather *super-artificial*, for nature has never done so much.

Away, then, with this cant about nature, and "invariable principles of poetry"! A great artist will make a block of stone as sublime as a mountain, and a good poet can imbue a pack of cards with more poetry than inhabits the forests of America. It is the business and the proof of a poet to give the lie to the proverb, and sometimes to "make a silken purse out of a sow's ear"; and, to conclude with another homely proverb, "a good workman will not find fault with his tools." [Byron's note.]

²⁷ A poem burlesquing the style of Milton, by John Phillips, 1705.

²⁸ An Homeric commentator of the 16th century (Jean de Spondé).

which preceded, and which shames them and theirs for ever and ever. I shall be told that amongst those I have been (or it may be, still am) conspicuous;—true, and I am ashamed of it. I *have* been amongst the builders of this Babel, attended by a confusion of tongues, but never amongst the envious destroyers of the classic temple of our predecessor. I have loved and honored the fame and name of that illustrious and unrivalled man, far more than my own paltry renown, and the trashy jingle of the crowd of “schools” and upstarts who pretend to rival or even surpass him. Sooner than a single leaf should be torn from his laurel, it were better that all which these men, and that I, as one of their set, have ever written, should

Line trunks, clothe spice, or, fluttering in a row,
Befringe the rails of Bedlam, or Soho! ²⁹

There are those who will believe this, and those who will not. You, sir, know how far I am sincere, and whether my opinion, not only in the short work intended for publication, and in private letters which can never be published, has or has not been the same. I look upon this as the declining age of English poetry; ³⁰ no regard for others, no selfish feeling, can prevent me from seeing this, and expressing the truth. There can be no worse sign for the taste of the times than the depreciation of Pope. It would be better to receive for proof Mr. Cobbett's rough but strong attack upon Shakespeare and Milton, ³¹ than to allow this smooth and “candid” under-

²⁹ Pope, “Epistle to Augustus,” lines 418-19.

³⁰ There are many parallels to this in Byron's critical observations. In his Diary for 1817 he had written: “With regard to poetry in general, I am convinced that we are all upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system, not worth a damn in itself, and from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free. I am the more confirmed in this by having lately gone over some of our classics, particularly Pope, whom I tried in this way:—I took Moore's poems, and my own, and some others, and went over them side by side with Pope's, and I was really astonished and mortified at the ineffable distance, in point of sense, learning, effect, and even imagination, passion, and invention, between the little Queen Anne's man and us of the Lower Empire.”

³¹ William Cobbett (1762-1835) was a radical writer who frequently attacked the traditional belief in the excellence of literary classics, Shakespeare in particular. For a representative passage, see his *Advice to Young Men*, which, however, was not yet published when Byron wrote the present letter.

mining of the reputation of the most perfect of our poets and the purest of our moralists. On his power in the passions, in description, in the mock-heroic, I leave others to descant. I take him on his strong ground, as an *ethical* poet: in the former none excel, in the mock-heroic and the ethical none equal him; and in my mind, the latter is the highest of all poetry, because it does that, in verse, which the greatest of men have wished to accomplish in prose. If the essence of poetry must be a lie, throw it to the dogs, or banish it from your republic, as Plato would have done.³² He who can reconcile poetry with truth and wisdom is the only true "poet" in its real sense, "the maker," "the creator,"—why must this mean the "liar," the "feigner," the "tale-teller"? A man may make and create better things than these.

I shall not presume to say that Pope is as high a poet as Shakespeare and Milton,—though his enemy, Warton,³³ places him immediately under them.³⁴ I would no more say this than I would assert in the mosque (once Saint Sophia's) that Socrates was a greater man than Mahomet. But if I say that he is very near them, it is no more than has been asserted of Burns, who is supposed

To rival all but Shakespeare's name below.

I say nothing against this opinion. But of what "order," according to the poetical aristocracy, are Burns's poems? There are his *opus magnum*, *Tam O'Shanter*, a tale; the *Cotter's Saturday Night*, a descriptive sketch; some others in the same style: the rest are songs. So much for the rank of his *productions*; the rank of Burns is the very first of his art. Of Pope I have expressed my opinion elsewhere, as also of the effect which the present attempts

³² See p. 223, and note.

³³ Byron calls Joseph Warton Pope's enemy, because in his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756, 1782) Warton had argued that Pope did not excel in the highest type of poetry, of which "the sublime and the pathetic are the two chief nerves."

³⁴ If the opinions cited by Mr. Bowles, of Dr. Johnson against Pope, are to be taken as decisive authority, they will also hold good against Gray, Milton, Swift, Thomson, and Dryden: in that case what becomes of Gray's poetical and Milton's moral character? even of Milton's poetical character, or, indeed, of English poetry in general? for Johnson strips many a leaf from every laurel. Still Johnson's is the finest critical work extant, and can never be read without instruction and delight. [Byron's note.]

at poetry have had upon our literature. If any great national or natural convulsion could or should overwhelm your country, in such sort as to sweep Great Britain from the kingdoms of the earth, and leave only that, after all, the most living of human things, a dead language, to be studied and read, and imitated by the wise of future and far generations, upon foreign shores; if your literature should become the learning of mankind, divested of party cabals, temporary fashions, and national pride and prejudice; an Englishman, anxious that the posterity of strangers should know that there had been such a thing as a British epic and tragedy, might wish for the preservation of Shakespeare and Milton; but the surviving world would snatch Pope from the wreck, and let the rest sink with the people. He is the moral poet of all civilization; and as such, let us hope that he will one day be the national poet of mankind. He is the only poet that never shocks; the only poet whose faultlessness has been made his reproach. Cast your eye over his productions; consider their extent, and contemplate their variety:—pastoral, passion, mock-heroic, translation, satire, ethics,—all excellent, and often perfect. If his great charm be his melody, how comes it that foreigners adore him, even in their diluted translations? But I have made this letter too long.—Give my compliments to Mr. Bowles.

Yours ever, very truly,

BYRON.

A DEFENCE OF POETRY

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

[In 1820 Shelley's friend Thomas Love Peacock published in *Ollier's Literary Miscellany* a paradoxical essay called "The Four Ages of Poetry." He sent a copy of it to the poet, who took it perhaps rather more seriously than the author intended, and in March, 1821, wrote to Peacock: "I dispatch by this post the first part of an essay intended to consist of three parts, which I design as an antidote to your 'Four Ages of Poetry.' You will see that I have taken a more general view of what is poetry than you have, and will per-

haps agree with several of my positions, without considering your own touched." The "Defence," of which the other two parts were never written, was prepared for publication in *The Liberal* by John Hunt, who omitted the passages specifically referring to Peacock's essay, leaving Shelley's discussion a general one, analogous to Sidney's "Apology for Poetry" and other great introductions to the subject. But Hunt did not bring the essay to publication, and it first appeared in the collection of Shelley's prose writings brought out by Mrs. Shelley in 1840. The following paragraphs from Peacock's "Four Ages" exhibit the main contentions which aroused Shelley to reply:

"In the origin and perfection of poetry, all the associations of life were composed of poetical materials. With us it is decidedly the reverse. We know, too, that there are no Dryads in Hyde Park, nor Naiads in the Regent's Canal. But barbaric manners and supernatural interventions are essential to poetry. Either in the scene, or in the time, or in both, it must be remote from our ordinary perceptions. While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age. Mr. Scott digs up the poachers and cattle-stealers of the ancient border. Lord Byron cruises for thieves and pirates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek islands. Mr. Southey wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, useless, and absurd, as being essentially poetical; and when he has a commonplace book full of monstrosities, strings them into an epic. Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons; and Mr. Coleridge, to the valuable information acquired from similar sources, superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticisms of German metaphysics, and favors the world with visions in verse, in which the quadruple elements of sexton, old woman, Jeremy Taylor, and Immanuel Kant are harmonized into a delicious poetical compound. Mr. Moore presents us with a Persian, and Mr. Campbell with a Pennsylvanian tale,¹ both formed on the same principle as Mr. Southey's epics, by extracting from a perfunctory and desultory perusal of a collection of voyages and travels, all that useful investigation would not seek for and that common sense would reject. . . .

¹ Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, 1817; Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming*, 1809.

"A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labors. The philosophic mental tranquillity which looks round with an equal eye on all external things, collects a store of ideas, discriminates their relative value, assigns to all their proper place, and from the materials of useful knowledge thus collected, appreciated, and arranged, forms new combinations that impress the stamp of their power and utility on the real business of life, is diametrically the reverse of that frame of mind which poetry inspires, or from which poetry can emanate. The highest inspirations of poetry are resolvable into three ingredients: the rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment; and can therefore serve only to ripen a splendid lunatic like Alexander, a puling driveler like Werter,² or a morbid dreamer like Wordsworth. It can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life a useful or rational man. It cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts and utilities of life, of which we have witnessed so many and so rapid advances. But though not useful, it may be said it is highly ornamental, and deserves to be cultivated for the pleasure it yields. Even if this be granted, it does not follow that a writer of poetry in the present state of society is not a waster of his own time, and a robber of that of others. Poetry is not one of those arts which, like painting, require repetition and multiplication, in order to be diffused among society. There are more good poems already existing than are sufficient to employ that portion of life which any mere reader and recipient of poetical impressions should devote to them, and these, having been produced in poetical times, are far superior in all the characteristics of poetry to the artificial reconstructions of a few morbid ascetics in unpoetical times. To read the promiscuous rubbish of the present time, to the exclusion of the select treasures of the past, is to substitute the worse for the better variety of the same mode of enjoyment.

"But in whatever degree poetry is cultivated, it must necessarily be to the neglect of some branch of useful study; and it is a lamentable spectacle to see minds capable of better

² In Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter*.

things running to seed in the specious indolence of these empty, aimless mockeries of intellectual exertion. Poetry was the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society; but for the maturity of mind to make a serious business of the playthings of its childhood, is as absurd as for a full-grown man to rub his gums with coral, and cry to be charmed to sleep by the jingle of silver bells."']

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced, and the latter as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to color them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity. The one is the *τὸ ποιεῖν*,¹ or the principle of synthesis, and has for its object those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *τὸ λογίζειν*, or principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things simply as relations; considering thoughts not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results. Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be the expression of the imagination; and poetry is connate with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Æolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings,

¹The act of creating, in contrast with *τὸ λογίζειν*, the act of reasoning; but the form of the latter is grammatically incorrect, as the verb is deponent. Shelley probably adapted the phrases from the Greek for himself.

which acts otherwise than in a lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds and motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre. A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflection of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding anti-type in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to the objects which delight a child, these expressions are what poetry is to higher objects. The savage (for the savage is to ages what the child is to years) expresses the emotions produced in him by surrounding objects in a similar manner; and language and gesture, together with plastic or pictorial imitation, become the image of the combined effect of those objects and his apprehension of them. Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expression; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts, become at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony. The social sympathies, or those laws from which, as from its elements, society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings co-exist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social; and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind. Hence men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actions,

distinct from that of the objects and the impressions represented by them, all expression being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds. But let us dismiss those more general considerations which might involve an inquiry into the principles of society itself, and restrict our view to the manner in which the imagination is expressed upon its forms.

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects. For there is a certain order or rhythm belonging to each of these classes of mimetic representation, from which the hearer and the spectator receive an intenser and purer pleasure than from any other; the sense of an approximation to this order has been called taste by modern writers. Every man, in the infancy of art, observes an order which approximates more or less closely to that from which this highest delight results; but the diversity is not sufficiently marked as that its gradations should be sensible, except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful (for so we may be permitted to name the relation between this highest pleasure and its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists to excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from the community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the

various subjects of the world" ²—and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful,—in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem; the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the forms of the creations of poetry.

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and, like Janus, have a double face of false and true. Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets; ³ a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events; such is the pretense of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of

² *Advancement of Learning*, Book ii. The original reads: "The same footsteps of nature treading or printing upon several subjects or matters."

³ Compare Sidney, *Apology for Poetry*: "Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, fore-seer, or prophet, as by his conjoined words *vaticinium* and *vaticinari* is manifest: so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this heart-ravishing knowledge."

prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons, and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry; and the choruses of *Æschylus*, and the Book of *Job*, and Dante's *Paradise*, would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact, if the limits of this essay did not forbid citation. The creations of music, sculpture, and painting are illustrations still more decisive.

Language, color, form, and religious and civil habits of action, are all the instruments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonym of the cause. But poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. And this springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than color, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments, and conditions of art have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication. Hence the fame of sculptors, painters, and musicians, although the intrinsic powers of the great masters of these arts may yield in no degree to that of those who have employed language as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts, has never equalled that of poets in the restricted sense of the term; as two performers of equal skill will produce unequal effects from a guitar and a harp. The fame of legislators and founders of religions, so long as their institutions last, alone seems to exceed that of poets in the restricted

sense; but it can scarcely be a question, whether, if we deduct the celebrity which their flattery of the gross opinions of the vulgar usually conciliates, together with that which belonged to them in their higher character of poets, any excess will remain.

We have thus circumscribed the word poetry within the limits of that art which is the most familiar and the most perfect expression of the faculty itself. It is necessary, however, to make the circle still narrower, and to determine the distinction between measured and unmeasured language; for the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy.⁴

Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a sort of uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence than the words themselves without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principles of its color and odor, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower—and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.

An observation of the regular mode of the recurrence of harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced meter, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony and language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony, which is its spirit, be observed. The practice is indeed convenient and popular, and to be preferred especially in such composition as includes much action; but every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification. The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between

⁴ Compare Coleridge and Wordsworth, p. 9.

philosophers and poets has been anticipated. Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the harmony of the epic, dramatic, and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action, and he forbore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style. Cicero sought to imitate the cadence of his periods, but with little success. Lord Bacon was a poet. His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect; it is a strain which distends and then bursts the circumference of the reader's mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy. All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth; but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmic, and contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music. Nor are those supreme poets, who have employed traditional forms of rhythm on account of the form and action of their subjects, less capable of perceiving and teaching the truth of things, than those who have omitted that form. Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power.

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.⁵ The one is partial, and applies

⁵ Compare Aristotle and Wordsworth, p. 13 and Note 8; also Sidney's *Apology*: "The historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence."

only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes have been called the moths of just history;⁶ they eat out the poetry of it. A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem.⁷ A single sentence may be considered as a whole, though it may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought. And thus all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy, were poets; and although the plan of these writers, especially that of Livy, restrained them from developing this faculty in its highest degree, they made copious and ample amends for their subjection, by filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images.

Having determined what is poetry, and who are poets, let us proceed to estimate its effects upon society.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellency of poetry, for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendor of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed

⁶ Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, Book ii. The word "just" is not in the original.

⁷ Compare Coleridge, p. 110, and Newman, p. 312.

of his peers; it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed. Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character; nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses; the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object, were unveiled to their depths in these immortal creations; the sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they are by no means to be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch, under names more or less specious, has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled image of unknown evil, before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the ancient armor or modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature can not be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and taste-

less costume. Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendor; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears.

The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life; nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it co-exists. The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his

poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in the participation of the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.

Homer and the cyclic poets were followed at a certain interval by the dramatic and lyrical poets of Athens, who flourished contemporaneously with all that is most perfect in the kindred expressions of the poetical faculty: architecture, painting, music, the dance, sculpture, philosophy, and we may add, the forms of civil life. For although the scheme of Athenian society was deformed by many imperfections which the poetry existing in chivalry and Christianity has erased from the habits and institutions of modern Europe, yet never at any other period has so much energy, beauty, and virtue been developed; never was blind strength and stubborn form so disciplined and rendered subject to the will of man, or that will less repugnant to the dictates of the beautiful and the true, as during the century which preceded the death of Socrates. Of no other epoch in the history of our species have we records and fragments stamped so visibly with the image of the divinity in man. But it is poetry alone, in form, in action, and in language, which has rendered this epoch memorable above all others, and the storehouse of examples to everlasting time. For written poetry existed at that epoch simultaneously with the other arts, and it is an idle inquiry to demand which gave and which received the light, which all, as from a common focus, have scattered over the darkest periods of succeeding time. We know no more of cause and effect than a constant conjunction of events; poetry is ever found to co-exist with whatever other arts contribute to the happiness and perfection of man. I appeal

to what has already been established to distinguish between the cause and the effect.

It was at the period here adverted to that the drama had its birth; and however a succeeding writer may have equalled or surpassed those few great specimens of the Athenian drama which have been preserved to us, it is indisputable that the art itself never was understood or practised according to the true philosophy of it, as at Athens. For the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institution, to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms of passion and of power; each division in the art was made perfect in its kind by artists of the most consummate skill, and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and unity one towards the other. On the modern stage a few only of the elements capable of expressing the image of the poet's conception are employed at once. We have tragedy without music and dancing, and music and dancing without the highest impersonations of which they are the fit accompaniment, and both without religion and solemnity. Religious institution has indeed been usually banished from the stage. Our system of divesting the actor's face of a mask,⁸ on which the many expressions appropriated to his dramatic character might be molded into one permanent and unchanging expression, is favorable only to a partial and inharmonious effect; it is fit for nothing but a monologue, where all the attention may be directed to some great master of ideal mimicry. The modern practice of blending comedy with tragedy, though liable to great abuse in point of practice, is undoubtedly an extension of the dramatic circle; but the comedy should be as in *King Lear*, universal, ideal, and sublime. It is perhaps the intervention of this principle which determines the balance in favor of *King Lear* against the *Edipus Tyrannus* or the *Agamemnon*, or, if you will, the trilogies with which they are connected; unless the intense power of the choral poetry, especially that of the latter, should be considered as restoring the equilibrium. *King Lear*, if it cannot sustain this comparison, may be judged to be

⁸ Compare Coleridge, p. 157, and note.

the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world, in spite of the narrow conditions to which the poet was subjected by the ignorance of the philosophy of the drama which has prevailed in modern Europe. Calderon, in his religious *autos*,⁹ has attempted to fulfil some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by Shakespeare, such as the establishing a relation between the drama and religion, and the accommodating them to music and dancing; but he omits the observation of conditions still more important, and more is lost than gained by the substitution of the rigidly defined and ever repeated idealisms of a distorted superstition for the living impersonations of the truth of human passion.

But I digress.—The connection of scenic exhibitions with the improvement or corruption of the manners of men has been universally recognized; in other words, the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form has been found to be connected with good and evil in conduct or habit. The corruption which has been imputed to the drama as an effect begins when the poetry employed in its constitution ends; I appeal to the history of manners whether the periods of the growth of the one and the decline of the other have not corresponded with an exactness equal to any example of moral cause and effect.

The drama at Athens, or wheresoever else it may have approached to its perfection, ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age. The tragedies of the Athenian poets are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance, stripped of all but that ideal perfection and energy which every one feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become. The imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty that they distend in their conception the capacity of that by which they are conceived; the good affections are strengthened by pity, indignation, terror and sorrow, and an exalted calm is prolonged from the satiety

⁹ Spanish ecclesiastical plays of the 17th century. In a letter of September 21, 1819, Shelley wrote: "I have read about twelve of [Calderon's] plays. Some of them certainly deserve to be ranked among the greatest and most perfect productions of the human mind."

of this high exercise of them into the tumult of familiar life; even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature;¹⁰ error is thus divested of its wilfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice. In the drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of their elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.

But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathizes with that decay. Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the forms of the great masterpieces of antiquity, divested of all harmonious accompaniment of the kindred arts; and often the very form misunderstood, or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines which the writer considers as moral truths, and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness with which the author, in common with his auditors, are infected. Hence what has been called the classical and domestic drama.¹¹ Addison's *Cato* is a specimen of the one; and would it were not superfluous to cite examples of the other! To such purposes poetry cannot be made subservient. Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it. And hence we observe that all dramatic writings of this nature are unimaginative in a singular degree; they affect sentiment and passion, which, divested of imagination, are other names for caprice and appetite. The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama is the reign of Charles II, when all forms in which

¹⁰ This passage implies Shelley's belief in the doctrine of Necessity, which he had derived in part from the writings of William Godwin.

¹¹ The two chief types of English tragedy in the 18th century. For the latter, see Lamb's remarks on *Lillo*, p. 176.

poetry had been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue. Milton stood alone, illuminating an age unworthy of him. At such periods the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them. Comedy loses its ideal universality; wit succeeds to humor; we laugh from self-complacency and triumph, instead of pleasure; malignity, sarcasm, and contempt succeed to sympathetic merriment; we hardly laugh, but we smile. Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life, becomes, from the very veil which it assumes, more active if less disgusting; it is a monster for which the corruption of society for ever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret.

The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other, the connection of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form. And it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. But, as Machiavelli says of political institutions, that life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles. And this is true with respect to poetry in its most extended sense; all language, institution and form, require not only to be produced but to be sustained; the office and character of a poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence, no less than as regards creation.

Civil war, the spoils of Asia, and the fatal predominance first of the Macedonian, and then of the Roman arms, were so many symbols of the extinction or suspension of the creative faculty in Greece. The bucolic writers,¹² who found patronage under the lettered tyrants of Sicily and Egypt, were the latest representatives of its most glorious reign. Their poetry is intensely melo-

¹²Pastoral poets, particularly Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus.

dious; like the odor of the tuberoses, it overcomes and sickens the spirit with excess of sweetness; whilst the poetry of the preceding age was as a meadow-gale of June, which mingles the fragrance of all the flowers of the field, and adds a quickening and harmonizing spirit of its own which endows the sense with a power of sustaining its extreme delight. The bucolic and erotic delicacy in written poetry is correlative with that softness in statuary, music, and the kindred arts, and even in manners and institutions, which distinguished the epoch to which I now refer. Nor is it the poetical faculty itself, or any misapplication of it, to which this want of harmony is to be imputed. An equal sensibility to the influence of the senses and the affections is to be found in the writings of Homer and Sophocles; the former, especially, has clothed sensual and pathetic images with irresistible attractions. Their superiority over these succeeding writers consists in the presence of those thoughts which belong to the inner faculties of our nature, not in the absence of those which are connected with the external; their incomparable perfection consists in a harmony of the union of all. It is not what the erotic poets have, but what they have not, in which their imperfection consists. It is not inasmuch as they were poets, but inasmuch as they were not poets, that they can be considered with any plausibility as connected with the corruption of their age. Had that corruption availed so as to extinguish in them the sensibility to pleasure, passion, and natural scenery which is imputed to them as an imperfection, the last triumph of evil would have been achieved. For the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure; and therefore it is corruption. It begins at the imagination and the intellect as at the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralyzing venom through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which hardly sense survives. At the approach of such a period, poetry ever addresses itself to those faculties which are the last to be destroyed, and its voice is heard, like the footsteps of Astræa,¹³ de-

¹³ Goddess of justice. Ovid had written (*Metamorphoses*, i, 150): "The virgin Astræa is the last of the heavenly deities to abandon the earth."

parting from the world. Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving; it is ever still the light of life, the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time. It will readily be confessed that those among the luxurious citizens of Syracuse and Alexandria who were delighted with the poems of Theocritus were less cold, cruel, and sensual than the remnant of their tribe. But corruption must utterly have destroyed the fabric of human society before poetry can ever cease. The sacred links of that chain have never been entirely disjoined, which descending through the minds of many men is attached to those great minds, whence as from a magnet the invisible effluence is sent forth, which at once connects, animates, and sustains the life of all.¹⁴ It is the faculty which contains within itself the seeds at once of its own and of social renovation. And let us not circumscribe the effects of the bucolic and erotic poetry within the limits of the sensibility of those to whom it was addressed. They may have perceived the beauty of those immortal compositions, simply as fragments and isolated portions; those who are more finely organized, or born in a happier age, may recognize them as episodes to that great poem which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.

The same revolution within a narrower sphere had place in ancient Rome; but the actions and forms of its social life never seem to have been perfectly saturated with the poetical element. The Romans appear to have considered the Greeks as the selectest treasures of the selectest forms of manners and of nature, and to have abstained from creating in measured language, sculpture, music, or architecture, any thing which might bear a particular relation to their own condition, whilst it should bear a general one to the universal constitution of the world. But we judge

¹⁴ A Platonic figure. Compare Shelley's translation of the dialogue *Ion*: "As the power of the stone [i.e., the magnet] circulates through all the links of this series, and attaches each to each, so the Muse, communicating through those whom she has first inspired, to all others capable of sharing in the inspiration, the influence of that first enthusiasm, creates a chain and a succession."

from partial evidence, and we judge perhaps partially. Ennius, Varro, Pacuvius, and Accius, all great poets, have been lost. Lucretius is in the highest, and Virgil in a very high sense, a creator. The chosen delicacy of expressions of the latter are as a mist of light which conceal from us the intense and exceeding truth of his conceptions of nature. Livy is instinct with poetry. Yet Horace, Catullus, Ovid, and generally the other great writers of the Virgilian age, saw man and nature in the mirror of Greece. The institutions also, and the religion of Rome, were less poetical than those of Greece, as the shadow is less vivid than the substance. Hence poetry in Rome seemed to follow, rather than accompany, the perfection of political and domestic society. The true poetry of Rome lived in its institutions; for whatever of beautiful, of true and majestic, they contained, could have sprung only from the faculty which creates the order in which they consist. The life of Camillus, the death of Regulus; the expectation of the senators, in their godlike state, of the victorious Gauls; the refusal of the republic to make peace with Hannibal after the battle of Cannæ, were not the consequences of a refined calculation of the probable personal advantage to result from such a rhythm and order in the shows of life, to those who were at once the poets and the actors of these immortal dramas. The imagination, beholding the beauty of this order, created it out of itself according to its own idea; the consequence was empire, and the reward everlasting fame. These things are not the less poetry *quia carent vate sacro*.¹⁵ They are the episodes of that cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of men. The Past, like an inspired rhapsodist, fills the theater of everlasting generations with their harmony.

At length the ancient system of religion and manners had fulfilled the circle of its evolutions. And the world would have fallen into utter anarchy and darkness, but that there were found poets among the authors of the Christian and chivalric systems of manners and religion, who created forms of opinion and action never before conceived; which, copied into the imaginations of men,

¹⁵ "Because they lack a bard" to celebrate them (Horace, *Odes*, v, 9).

became as generals to the bewildered armies of their thoughts. It is foreign to the present purpose to touch upon the evil produced by these systems; except that we protest, on the ground of the principles already established, that no portion of it can be attributed to the poetry they contain.

It is probable that the poetry of Moses, Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah had produced a great effect upon the mind of Jesus and his disciples. The scattered fragments preserved to us by the biographers of this extraordinary person are all instinct with the most vivid poetry. But his doctrines seem to have been quickly distorted. At a certain period after the prevalence of a system of opinions founded upon those promulgated by him, the three forms into which Plato had distributed the faculties of mind underwent a sort of apotheosis, and became the object of the worship of the civilized world.¹⁶ Here it is to be confessed that "Light" seems to "thicken,"

And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.¹⁷

But mark how beautiful an order has sprung from the dust and blood of this fierce chaos! how the world, as from a resurrection, balancing itself on the golden wings of knowledge and of hope, has reassumed its yet unwearied flight into the heaven of time. Listen to the music, unheard by outward ears, which is as a ceaseless and invisible wind, nourishing its everlasting course with strength and swiftness.

The poetry in the doctrines of Jesus Christ, and the mythology and institutions of the Celtic conquerors of the Roman empire, outlived the darkness and the convulsions connected with their growth and victory, and blended themselves in a new fabric of manners and opinion. It is an error to impute the ignorance of the Dark Ages to the Christian doctrines or the predominance of the Celtic nations. Whatever of evil their agencies may have con-

¹⁶ Shelley, who had always been an opponent of Christian theology, explains in this way the origin of the doctrine of the Trinity.

¹⁷ *Macbeth*, III, ii, 50-53.

tained sprang from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition. Men, from causes too intricate to be here discussed, had become insensible and selfish; their own will had become feeble, and yet they were its slaves, and thence the slaves of the will of others; lust, fear, avarice, cruelty, and fraud, characterized a race amongst whom no one was to be found capable of *creating* in form, language, or institution. The moral anomalies of such a state of society are not justly to be charged upon any class of events immediately connected with them, and those events are most entitled to our approbation which could dissolve it most expeditiously. It is unfortunate for those who cannot distinguish words from thoughts, that many of these anomalies have been incorporated into our popular religion.

It was not until the eleventh century that the effects of the poetry of the Christian and chivalric systems began to manifest themselves. The principle of equality had been discovered and applied by Plato in his *Republic*, as the theoretical rule of the mode in which the materials of pleasure and of power produced by the common skill and labor of human beings ought to be distributed among them. The limitations of this rule were asserted by him to be determined only by the sensibility of each, or the utility to result to all. Plato, following the doctrines of Timæus and Pythagoras, taught also a moral and intellectual system of doctrine, comprehending at once the past, the present, and the future condition of man. Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths contained in these views to mankind, and Christianity, in its abstract purity, became the exoteric expression of the esoteric doctrines of the poetry and wisdom of antiquity. The incorporation of the Celtic nations with the exhausted population of the south impressed upon it the figure of the poetry existing in their mythology and institutions. The result was a sum of the action and reaction of all the causes included in it; for it may be assumed as a maxim that no nation or religion can supersede any other without incorporating into itself a portion of that which it supersedes. The abolition of personal and domestic slavery, and the emancipation of women from

a great part of the degrading restraints of antiquity were among the consequences of these events.

The abolition of personal slavery is the basis of the highest political hope that it can enter into the mind of man to conceive. The freedom of women produced the poetry of sexual love. Love became a religion, the idols of whose worship were ever present. It was as if the statues of Apollo and the Muses had been endowed with life and motion, and had walked forth among their worshippers; so that earth became peopled by the inhabitants of a diviner world. The familiar appearances and proceedings of life became wonderful and heavenly, and a paradise was created as out of the wrecks of Eden. And as this creation itself is poetry, so its creators were poets, and language was the instrument of their art: "Galeotto fù il libro, e chi lo scrisse."¹⁸ The Provençal Trouveurs, or inventors, preceded Petrarch, whose verses are as spells which unseal the inmost enchanted fountains of the delight which is in the grief of love. It is impossible to feel them without becoming a portion of that beauty which we contemplate; it were superfluous to explain how the gentleness and elevation of mind connected with these sacred emotions can render men more amiable, more generous and wise, and lift them out of the dull vapors of the little world of self. Dante understood the secret things of love even more than Petrarch. His *Vita Nuova* is an inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and language; it is the idealized history of that period and those intervals of his life which were dedicated to love. His apotheosis of Beatrice in Paradise, and the gradations of his own love and her loveliness, by which as by steps he feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause,¹⁹ is the most glorious imagination of modern poetry. The acutest critics have justly reversed the judgment of the vulgar and the order of the great acts of the *Divina Commedia*, in the measure of the admiration which they accord to *Hell*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. The latter is a perpetual hymn of everlasting love. Love, which found a worthy

¹⁸ "Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it" (Dante, *Inferno*, v. 137).

¹⁹ See the *Paradiso*, *passim*.

poet in Plato alone of all the ancients, has been celebrated by a chorus of the greatest writers of the renovated world; and the music has penetrated the caverns of society, and its echoes still drown the dissonance of arms and superstition. At successive intervals, Ariosto, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser, Calderon, Rousseau, and the great writers of our own age, have celebrated the dominion of love, planting as it were trophies in the human mind of that sublimest victory over sensuality and force. The true relation borne to each other by the sexes into which human kind is distributed has become less misunderstood; and if the error which confounded diversity with inequality of the powers of the two sexes has been partially recognized in the opinions and institutions of modern Europe, we owe this great benefit to the worship of which chivalry was the law, and poets the prophets.

The poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world. The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized, are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised. It is a difficult question to determine how far they were conscious of the distinction which must have subsisted in their minds between their own creeds and that of the people. Dante at least appears to wish to mark the full extent of it by placing Riphæus,²⁰ whom Virgil calls *iustissimus unus*, in Paradise, and observing a most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments. And Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system, of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil. Implacable hate, patient cunning, and a sleepless refinement of device to inflict the extremest anguish on an enemy, these things are evil! and, although venial in a slave, are not to be forgiven in a tyrant; although redeemed by much that

²⁰ A Trojan. See the *Paradiso*, xx, 67 ff.

ennobles his defeat in one subdued, are marked by all that dishonors his conquest in the victor. Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments. Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his Devil.²¹ And this bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius. He mingled as it were the elements of human nature as colors upon a single pallet, and arranged them in the composition of his great picture according to the laws of epic truth, that is, according to the laws of that principle by which a series of actions of the external universe and of intelligent and ethical beings is calculated to excite the sympathy of succeeding generations of mankind. The *Divina Commedia* and *Paradise Lost* have conferred upon modern mythology a systematic form; and when change and time shall have added one more superstition to the mass of those which have arisen and decayed upon the earth, commentators will be learnedly employed in elucidating the religion of ancestral Europe, only not utterly forgotten because it will have been stamped with the eternity of genius.

Homer was the first and Dante the second epic poet: that is, the second poet, the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge and sentiment and religion of the age in which he lived, and of the ages which followed it, developing itself in correspondence with their development. For Lucretius had limed the wings of his swift spirit in the dregs of the sensible world; and Virgil, with a modesty that ill became his genius, had affected the fame of an imitator, even whilst he created anew all that he copied; and none among the flock of mock-birds, though their notes are

²¹ A misrepresentation of Milton's intention: yet the moral dignity of the Satan of *Paradise Lost* had often been remarked.

sweet, Apollonius Rhodius, Quintus (Calaber) Smyrnæus, Nonnus, Lucan, Statius, or Claudian,²² have sought even to fulfil a single condition of epic truth. Milton was the third epic poet. For if the title of epic in its highest sense be refused to the *Æneid*, still less can it be conceded to the *Orlando Furioso*, the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the *Lusiad*, or the *Fairy Queen*.²³

Dante and Milton were both deeply penetrated with the ancient religion of the civilized world, and its spirit exists in their poetry probably in the same proportion as its forms survived in the unreformed worship of modern Europe. The one preceded and the other followed the Reformation at almost equal intervals. Dante was the first religious reformer, and Luther surpassed him rather in the rudeness and acrimony than in the boldness of his censures of papal usurpation. Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. He was the congregator of those great spirits who presided over the resurrection of learning, the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world. His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be withdrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.

The age immediately succeeding to that of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio was characterized by a revival of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Chaucer caught

²² Minor Greek and Latin epic poets.

²³ Narrative poems by Ariosto, Tasso, Camoens, and Spenser.

the sacred inspiration, and the superstructure of English literature is based upon the materials of Italian invention. But let us not be betrayed from a defence into a critical history of poetry and its influence on society. Be it enough to have pointed out the effects of poets, in the large and true sense of the word, upon their own and all succeeding times.

But poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists, on another plea. It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful. Let us examine, as the grounds of this distinction, what is here meant by utility. Pleasure or good, in a general sense, is that which the consciousness of a sensitive and intelligent being seeks, and in which, when found, it acquiesces. There are two kinds of pleasure, one durable, universal, and permanent; the other transitory and particular. Utility may either express the means of producing the former or the latter. In the former sense, whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful. But a narrower meaning may be assigned to the word utility, confining it to express that which banishes the importunity of the wants of our animal nature, the surrounding men with security of life, the dispersing the grosser delusions of superstition, and the conciliating such a degree of mutual forbearance among men as may consist with the motives of personal advantage.

Undoubtedly the promoters of utility, in this limited sense, have their appointed office in society. They follow the footsteps of poets, and copy the sketches of their creations into the book of common life. They make space and give time. Their exertions are of the highest value, so long as they confine their administration of the concerns of the inferior powers of our nature within the limits due to the superior ones. But whilst the skeptic destroys gross superstitions, let him spare to deface, as some of the French writers²⁴ have defaced, the eternal truths characterised upon the imaginations of men. Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist com-

²⁴ Such as Voltaire and other radical skeptics of the 18th century; see the opening of the third paragraph following.

bines labor, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate²⁵ at once the extremes of luxury and of want. They have exemplified the saying, "To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not, the little that he hath shall be taken away."²⁶ The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty.

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense, the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with the pleasures of the superior portions of our being. Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle; tragedy delights by affording a shadow of that pleasure which exists in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth."²⁷ Not that this highest species of pleasure is necessarily linked with pain. The delight of love and friendship, the ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception and still more of the creation of poetry, is often wholly unalloyed.

The production and assurance of pleasure in this highest sense is true utility. Those who produce and preserve this pleasure are poets or poetical philosophers.

The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and their disciples, in favor of oppressed and de-luded humanity, are entitled to the gratitude of mankind. Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have ex-

²⁵ Aggravate, intensify; compare "exasperation," p. 303.

²⁶ *Matthew* 25:29 (inaccurately quoted).

²⁷ *Ecclesiastes* 7:2.

hibited, had they never lived. A little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women, and children burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain.²⁸ But it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of ancient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the ancient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least what is wiser and better than what men now practice and endure. But we let "*I dare not wait upon I would*, like the poor cat in the adage."²⁹ We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man,

²⁸ Abolished by the Spanish Cortes in 1820.

²⁹ *Macbeth*, I, vii, 44-45.

having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, which is the basis of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labor, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind? From what other cause has it arisen that the discoveries which should have lightened have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam? Poetry, and the principle of Self of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold: by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good. The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the center and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred.³⁰ It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of all things; it is as the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and splendor of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. What were virtue, love, patriotism, friendship; what were the scenery of this beautiful universe which we inhabit; what were our consolations on this side of the grave, and what were our aspirations beyond it,—if

³⁰ Compare Wordsworth, p. 15.

poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar? Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connection of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions—a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself; for Milton conceived the *Paradise Lost* as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the muse having "dictated" to him the "unpremeditated song."³¹ And let this be an answer to those who would allege the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the *Orlando Furioso*. Compositions so produced are to poetry what mosaic is to painting. The instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty is still more observable in the plastic and pictorial arts: a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process.

³¹ *Paradise Lost*, ix, 24 ("verse," not "song").

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling, sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression; so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own;³² but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the morning calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. The enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship is essentially linked with such emotions; and whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a universe. Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined organization, but they can color all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world; a word, a trait in the representation of a scene or a passion will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced these emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past. Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and, veiling them or in language or in form, sends them forth among mankind, bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide—abide, because there is no portal of expression from the caverns of the spirit which they inhabit into the universe of things. Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty

³² Compare Plato, in Shelley's version of the *Ion*: "Those who declaim various and beautiful poetry . . . are not enabled to do so by art or study; but every rhapsodist or poet . . . is excellent in proportion to the extent of his participation in the divine influence and the degree in which the Muse itself has descended on him."

of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient.

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.³³

But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitant of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. It justifies the bold and true word of Tasso: *Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta*.³⁴

A poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue, and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men. As to his glory, let time be challenged to declare whether the fame of any other institutor of human life be comparable to that of a poet. That he is

³³ *Paradise Lost*, I, 254-55.

³⁴ "None deserves the name of creator save God and the Poet."

the wisest, the happiest, and the best, inasmuch as he is a poet, is equally incontrovertible: the greatest poets have been men of the most spotless virtue, of the most consummate prudence, and, if we would look into the interior of their lives, the most fortunate of men; and the exceptions, as they regard those who possessed the poetic faculty in a high yet inferior degree, will be found on consideration to confirm rather than destroy the rule.³⁵ Let us for a moment stoop to the arbitration of popular breath, and, usurping and uniting in our own persons the incompatible characters of accuser, witness, judge, and executioner, let us decide without trial, testimony, or form, that certain motives of those who are "there sitting where we dare not soar" are reprehensible. Let us assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Virgil was a flatterer, that Horace was a coward, that Tasso was a madman, that Lord Bacon was a speculator, that Raphael was a libertine, that Spenser was a poet laureate.³⁶ It is inconsistent with this division of our subject to cite living poets, but posterity has done ample justice to the great names now referred to. Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins were as scarlet, they are now white as snow; they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and redeemer, Time. Observe in what a ludicrous chaos the imputations of real or fictitious crime have been confused in the contemporary calumnies against poetry and poets;³⁷ consider how little is as it appears—or appears as it is; look to your own motives, and judge not, lest ye be judged.

Poetry, as has been said, differs in this respect from logic, that it is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence have no necessary connection with the consciousness or will. It is presumptuous to determine that these are the

³⁵ Compare Newman, p. 320.

³⁶ This contemptuous use of the title "poet laureate" is due to Shelley's hatred of subserviency to courtly honors on the part of men of letters, and more particularly to the animosity existing between Southey, then poet laureate, and the poets of the radical group. The title is not accurately used of Spenser.

³⁷ Shelley probably has in mind his friends Leigh Hunt and Lord Byron, as well as himself; in all these cases public opinion had confused alleged immorality in the poets' writings and in their lives (for Hunt, see the note on p. 166).

necessary conditions of all mental causation, when mental effects are experienced insusceptible of being referred to them. The frequent recurrence of the poetical power, it is obvious to suppose, may produce in the mind a habit of order and harmony correlative with its own nature and with its effects upon other minds. But in the intervals of inspiration—and they may be frequent without being durable—a poet becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden reflux of the influences under which others habitually live. But as he is more delicately organized than other men, and sensible to pain and pleasure, both his own and that of others, in a degree unknown to them, he will avoid the one and pursue the other with an ardor proportioned to this difference. And he renders himself obnoxious to calumny when he neglects to observe the circumstances under which these objects of universal pursuit and flight have disguised themselves in one another's garments.

But there is nothing necessarily evil in this error, and thus cruelty, envy, revenge, avarice, and the passions purely evil, have never formed any portion of the popular imputations on the lives of poets.

I have thought it most favorable to the cause of truth to set down these remarks according to the order in which they were suggested to my mind, by a consideration of the subject itself, instead of observing the formality of a polemical reply; but if the view which they contain be just, they will be found to involve a refutation of the arguers against poetry, so far at least as regards the first division of the subject. I can readily conjecture what should have moved the gall of some learned and intelligent writers who quarrel with certain versifiers; I, like them, confess myself unwilling to be stunned by the *Theseids* of the hoarse Codrus³⁸ of the day. Bavius and Mævius³⁹ undoubtedly are, as they ever were, insufferable persons. But it belongs to a philosophical critic to distinguish rather than confound.

The first part of these remarks has related to poetry

³⁸ See Juvenal, *Satires*, i, 1-2: "Am I never to retort, being so often bored by hoarse Codrus' *Theseid*?"

³⁹ Roman poets spoken of with contempt by Virgil (*Eclogues*, iii, 90).

in its elements and principles; and it has been shown, as well as the narrow limits assigned them would permit, that what is called poetry in a restricted sense, has a common source with all other forms of order and of beauty according to which the materials of human life are susceptible of being arranged, and which is poetry in a universal sense.

The second part ⁴⁰ will have for its object an application of these principles to the present state of the cultivation of poetry, and a defence of the attempt to idealize the modern forms of manners and opinions, and compel them into a subordination to the imaginative and creative faculty. For the literature of England, an energetic development of which has ever preceded or accompanied a great and free development of the national will, has arisen as it were from a new birth. In spite of the low-thoughted envy which would undervalue contemporary merit, our own will be a memorable age in intellectual achievements, and we live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty. The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve the power which is seated on the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words.⁴¹ They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its

⁴⁰ Never written (see introductory note).

⁴¹ Compare Keats's sonnet, "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning," p. 167.

manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

POETRY, WITH REFERENCE TO ARISTOTLE'S
"POETICS"

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

[First published in the *London Review*, 1829; later included in Newman's *Essays, Critical and Historical*. The present selection omits the first three sections, on Aristotle's view of the drama, and the last section, on "poetical composition."]

Poetry, according to Aristotle, is a representation of the ideal.¹ Biography and history represent individual characters and actual facts; poetry, on the contrary, generalizing from the phenomenon of nature and life, supplies us with pictures drawn, not after an existing pattern, but after a creation of the mind. Fidelity is the primary merit of biography and history; the essence of poetry is fiction. "Poesis nihil aliud est," says Bacon, "quam historiæ imitatio ad placitum."² It delineates that perfection which the imagination suggests, and to which as a limit the present system of Divine Providence actually tends. Moreover, by confining the attention to one series of events and scene of action, it bounds and finishes off the confused luxuriance of real nature; while, by a skillful adjustment of circumstances, it brings into sight the connection of cause and effect, completes the

¹ See note 8 on p. 13 and note 3 on p. 116.

² "Poetry is nothing else than an imitation of history for the giving of pleasure." (*De Augmentis Scientiarum*, Book ii.) Compare the similar passage in *The Advancement of Learning*: "The use of this feigned history hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it—the world being in proportion inferior to the soul." (Book ii.)

dependence of the parts one on another, and harmonizes the proportions of the whole. It is then but the type and model of history or biography, if we may be allowed the comparison, bearing some resemblance to the abstract mathematical formulæ of physics, before they are modified by the contingencies of atmosphere and friction. Hence, while it recreates the imagination by the super-human loveliness of its views, it provides a solace for the mind broken by the disappointments and sufferings of actual life; and becomes, moreover, the utterance of the inward emotions of a right moral feeling, seeking a purity and a truth which this world will not give.

It follows that the poetical mind is one full of the eternal forms of beauty and perfection; these are its material of thought, its instrument and medium of observation,—these color each object to which it directs its view. It is called imaginative or creative from the originality and independence of its modes of thinking, compared with the commonplace and matter-of-fact conceptions of ordinary minds, which are fettered down to the particular and individual. At the same time it feels a natural sympathy with everything great and splendid in the physical and moral world; and, selecting such from the mass of common phenomena, incorporates them, as it were, into the substance of its own creations. From living thus in a world of its own, it speaks the language of dignity, emotion, and refinement. Figure is its necessary medium of communication with man; for in the feebleness of ordinary terms to express its ideas, and in the absence of terms of abstract perfection, the adoption of metaphorical language is the only poor means allowed it for imparting to others its intense feelings. A metrical garb has, in all languages, been appropriated to poetry—it is but the outward development of the music and harmony within. The verse, far from being a restraint on the true poet, is the suitable index of his sense, and is adopted by his free and deliberate choice. We shall presently show the applicability of our doctrine to the various departments of poetical composition; first, however, it will be right to volunteer an explanation which may save it from much misconception and objection. Let not our notion be thought arbitrarily to limit the number

of poets, generally considered such. It will be found to lower particular works, or parts of works, rather than the authors themselves; sometimes to disparage only the vehicle in which the poetry is conveyed. There is an ambiguity in the word "poetry," which is taken to signify both the gift itself, and the written composition which is the result of it. Thus there is an apparent, but no real contradiction, in saying a poem may be but partially poetical;³ in some passages more so than in others; and sometimes not poetical at all. We only maintain, not that the writers forfeit the name of poet who fail at times to answer to our requisitions, but that they are poets only so far forth, and inasmuch as, they do answer to them. We may grant, for instance, that the vulgarities of old Phœnix in the ninth *Iliad*, or of the nurse of Orestes in the *Choephora*,⁴ are in themselves unworthy of their respective authors, and refer them to the wantonness of exuberant genius, and yet maintain that the scenes in question contain much incidental poetry. Now and then the lustre of the true metal catches the eye, redeeming whatever is unseemly and worthless in the rude ore; still the ore is not the metal. Nay, sometimes, and not unfrequently in Shakespeare, the introduction of unpoetical matter may be necessary for the sake of relief, or as a vivid expression of recondite conceptions, and, as it were, to make friends with the reader's imagination. This necessity, however, cannot make the additions in themselves beautiful and pleasing. Sometimes, on the other hand, while we do not deny the incidental beauty of a poem, we are ashamed and indignant on witnessing the unworthy substance in which that beauty is imbedded. This remark applies strongly to the immoral compositions to which Lord Byron devoted his last years.⁵

Now to proceed with our proposed investigation.

1. We will notice *descriptive poetry* first. Empedocles wrote his physics in verse, and Oppian his history of animals. Neither were poets—the one was an historian

³ Compare Coleridge, p. 110, and Shelley, p. 283.

⁴ *Iliad*, ix, 449-53; *Choephora* (of Æschylus), lines 736-50. In both passages an aged person garrulously calls to mind certain physical inconveniences in the care of young children.

⁵ *Don Juan* (1819-24), and perhaps *Cain* (1821).

of nature, the other a sort of biographer of brutes.⁶ Yet a poet may make natural history or philosophy the material of his composition. But under his hands they are no longer a bare collection of facts or principles, but are painted with a meaning, beauty, and harmonious order not their own. Thomson has sometimes been commended for the novelty and minuteness of his remarks upon nature.⁷ This is not the praise of a poet; whose office rather is to represent known phenomena in a new connection or medium. In "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" the poetical magician invests the commonest scenes of a country life with the hues, first of a cheerful, then of a pensive imagination. It is the charm of the descriptive poetry of a religious mind that nature is viewed in a moral connection. Ordinary writers, for instance, compare aged men to trees in autumn—a gifted poet will in the fading trees discern the fading men.⁸ Pastoral poetry is a description of rustics, agriculture, and cattle, softened off and corrected from the rude health of nature. Virgil, and much more Pope and others, have run into the fault of coloring too highly; instead of drawing generalized and ideal forms of shepherds, they have given us pictures of gentlemen and beaux. Their composition may be poetry, but it is not pastoral poetry.

2. The difference between poetical and historical *narrative* may be illustrated by the Tales Founded on Facts, generally of a religious character, so common in the present day, which we must not be thought to approve because we use them for our purpose. The author finds in the circumstances of the case many particulars too trivial for public notice, or irrelevant to the main story, or partaking too much of the peculiarity of individual minds: these he omits. He finds connected events separated from

⁶ Compare Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1: "Even when a treatise on medicine or natural science is brought out in verse, the name of poet is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common but the meter, so that it would be right to call the one poet, the other physicist." (Butcher's translation.)

⁷ In *The Seasons* (1726-30).

⁸ Thus: "How quiet shows the woodland scene!
Each flower and tree, its duty done.
Reposing in decay serene,
Like weary men when age is won," etc.
[Newman's note.]

each other by time or place, or a course of action distributed among a multitude of agents; he limits the scene or duration of the tale, and dispenses with his host of characters by condensing the mass of incident and action in the history of a few. He compresses long controversies into a concise argument, and exhibits characters by dialogue, and (if such be his object) brings prominently forward the course of Divine Providence by a fit disposition of his materials. Thus he selects, combines, refines, colors,—in fact, poetizes. His facts are no longer actual, but ideal; a tale founded on facts is a tale generalized from facts. The authors of *Peperil of the Peak* and of *Brambletye House* ⁹ have given us their respective descriptions of the profligate times of Charles II. Both accounts are interesting, but for different reasons. That of the latter writer has the fidelity of history; Walter Scott's picture is the hideous reality unintentionally softened and decorated by the poetry of his own mind. Miss Edgeworth sometimes apologizes for certain incidents in her tales by stating that they took place "by one of those strange chances which occur in life, but seem incredible when found in writing." Such an excuse evinces a misconception of the principle of fiction, which, being the perfection of the actual, prohibits the introduction of any such anomalies of experience. It is by a similar impropriety that painters sometimes introduce unusual sunsets, or other singular phenomena of lights and forms. Yet some of Miss Edgeworth's works contain much poetry of narrative. *Manœuvring* ¹⁰ is perfect in its way,—the plot and characters are natural, without being too real to be pleasing.

3. *Character* is made poetical by a like process. The writer draws, indeed, from experience; but unnatural peculiarities are laid aside, and harsh contrasts reconciled. If it be said the fidelity of the imitation is often its greatest merit, we have only to reply that in such cases the pleasure is not poetical, but consists in the mere recognition. All novels and tales which introduce real characters are in the same degree unpoetical. Portrait-painting, to be poetical, should furnish an abstract representa-

⁹ By Horace Smith (1826).

¹⁰ One of the *Tales of Fashionable Life*, 1809.

tion of an individual; ¹¹ the abstraction being more rigid, inasmuch as the painting is confined to one point of time. The artist should draw independently of the accidents of attitude, dress, occasional feeling, and transient action. He should depict the general spirit of his subject—as if he were copying from memory, not from a few particular sittings. An ordinary painter will delineate with rigid fidelity, and will make a caricature; but the learned artist contrives so to temper his composition as to sink all offensive peculiarities and hardnesses of individuality, without diminishing the striking effect of the likeness, or acquainting the casual spectator with the secret of his art. Miss Edgeworth's representations of the Irish character are actual, and not poetical—nor were they intended to be so. They are interesting, because they are faithful. If there is poetry about them, it exists in the personages themselves, not in her representation of them. She is only the accurate reporter in word of what was poetical in fact. Hence, moreover, when a deed or incident is striking in itself, a judicious writer is led to describe it in the most simple and colorless terms, his own being unnecessary; for instance, if the greatness of the action itself excites the imagination; or the depth of the suffering interests the feelings. In the usual phrase, the circumstances are left “to speak for themselves.”

Let it not be said that our doctrine is adverse to that individuality in the delineation of character which is a principal charm of fiction. It is not necessary for the ideality of a composition to avoid those minuter shades of difference between man and man which give to poetry its plausibility and life; but merely such violation of general nature, such improbabilities, wanderings, or coarsenesses, as interfere with the refined and delicate enjoyment of the imagination; which would have the elements of beauty extracted out of the confused multitude of ordinary actions and habits, and combined with consistency and ease. Nor does it exclude the introduction of imperfect or odious characters. The original conception of a weak or guilty mind may have its intrinsic

¹¹ The leading doctrine of 18th century artists; see, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses at the Royal Academy.

beauty; and much more so, when it is connected with a tale which finally adjusts whatever is reprehensible in the personages themselves. Richard and Iago are subservient to the plot. Moral excellence in some characters may become even a fault. The Clytemnestra of Euripides¹² is so interesting that the divine vengeance, which is the main subject of the drama, seems almost unjust. Lady Macbeth, on the contrary, is the conception of one deeply learned in the poetical art. She is polluted with the most heinous crimes, and meets the fate she deserves. Yet there is nothing in the picture to offend the taste, and much to feed the imagination. Romeo and Juliet are too good for the termination to which the plot leads; so are Ophelia and the Bride of Lammermoor. In these cases there is something inconsistent with correct beauty, and therefore unpoetical. We do not say the fault could be avoided without sacrificing more than would be gained; still it is a fault. It is scarcely possible for a poet satisfactorily to connect innocence with ultimate happiness, when the notion of a future life is excluded. Honors paid to the memory of the dead are some alleviation of the harshness. In his use of the doctrine of a future life, Southey is admirable. Other writers are content to conduct their heroes to temporal happiness;—Southey refuses to present comfort to his Ladurlad, Thalaba, and Roderick,¹³ but carries them on through suffering to another world. The death of his hero is the termination of the action; yet so little, in two of them, at least, does this catastrophe excite sorrowful feelings, that some readers may be startled to be reminded of the fact. If a melancholy is thrown over the conclusion of the *Roderick*, it is from the peculiarities of the hero's previous history.

4. Opinions, feelings, manners, and customs are made poetical by the delicacy or splendor with which they are expressed. This is seen in the ode, elegy, sonnet, and ballad; in which a single idea, perhaps, or familiar occurrence, is invested by the poet with pathos or dignity. The ballad of "Old Robin Gray" will serve for an in-

¹² In the tragedy of *Electra*.

¹³ Ladurlad in *The Curse of Kehama*; the others in epics named from the characters mentioned.

stance, out of a multitude; again, Lord Byron's Hebrew Melody, beginning "Were my bosom as false," etc.; or Cowper's "Lines on His Mother's Picture"; or Milman's Funeral Hymn in *The Martyr of Antioch*; ¹⁴ or Milton's Sonnet on his Blindness; or Bernard Barton's ¹⁵ "Dream." As picturesque specimens, we may name Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic," or Joanna Baillie's "Chough and Crow"; and for the more exalted and splendid style, Gray's "Bard," or Milton's "Hymn on the Nativity," in which facts with which every one is familiar are made new by the coloring of a poetical imagination. It must all along be observed that we are not adducing instances for their own sake, but in order to illustrate our general doctrine, and to show its applicability to those compositions which are by universal consent acknowledged to be poetical.

The department of poetry we are now speaking of is of much wider extent than might at first sight appear. It will include such moralizing and philosophical poems as Young's *Night Thoughts* and Byron's *Childe Harold*. There is much bad taste, at present, in the judgment passed on compositions of this kind. It is the fault of the day to mistake mere eloquence for poetry; whereas, in direct opposition to the conciseness and simplicity of the poet, the talent of the orator consists in making much of a single idea. "Sic dicet ille ut verset sæpe multis modis eandem et unam rem, ut hæreat in eadem commoreturque sententia." ¹⁶ This is the great art of Cicero himself, who, whether he is engaged in statement, argument, or raillery, never ceases till he has exhausted the subject; going round about it, and placing it in every different light, yet without repetition to offend or weary the reader. This faculty seems to consist in the power of throwing off harmonious verses, which, while they have a respectable portion of meaning, yet are especially intended to charm the ear. In popular poems, common ideas are unfolded with copiousness, and set off in polished verse—and this is called poetry. Such is the character of Campbell's

¹⁴ A poetic drama published 1822.

¹⁵ A Quaker poet (1784-1849).

¹⁶ "He will speak in such a way as often to turn over one and the same thing in many ways, and to dwell and remain on the same idea." Cicero, *Orator*, 137 (inaccurately quoted).

Pleasures of Hope; it is in his minor poems that the author's poetical genius rises to its natural elevation. In *Childe Harold*, too, the writer is carried through his Spenserian stanza with the unweariness and equable fullness of accomplished eloquence; opening, illustrating, and heightening one idea, before he passes on to another. His composition is an extended funeral sermon over buried joys and pleasures. His laments over Greece, Rome, and the fallen in various engagements, have quite the character of panegyrical orations; while by the very attempt to describe the celebrated buildings and sculpture of antiquity, he seems to confess that *they* are the poetical text, his the rhetorical comment. Still it is a work of splendid talent, though, as a whole, not of the highest poetical excellence. Juvenal is perhaps the only ancient author who habitually substitutes declamation for poetry.

5. The *philosophy of mind* may equally be made subservient to poetry, as the philosophy of nature. It is a common fault to mistake a mere knowledge of the heart for poetical talent. Our greatest masters have known better;—they have subjected metaphysics to their art. In Hamlet, Macbeth, Richard, and Othello, the philosophy of mind is but the material of the poet. These personages are ideal; they are effects of the contact of a given internal character with given outward circumstances, the results of combined conditions determining (so to say) a moral curve of original and inimitable properties. Philosophy is exhibited in the same subserviency to poetry in many parts of Crabbe's *Tales of the Hall*. In the writings of this author there is much to offend a refined taste; but, at least in the work in question, there is much of a highly poetical cast. It is a representation of the action and reaction of two minds upon each other and upon the world around them. Two brothers of different characters and fortunes, and strangers to each other, meet. Their habits of mind, the formation of those habits by external circumstances, their respective media of judgment, their points of mutual attraction and repulsion, the mental position of each in relation to a variety of trifling phenomena of everyday nature and life, are beautifully developed in a series of tales moulded into a connected narrative. We are tempted to single out the fourth book,

which gives an account of the childhood and education of the younger brother, and which, for variety of thought as well as fidelity of description, is in our judgment beyond praise. The Waverley Novels would afford us specimens of a similar excellence. One striking peculiarity of these tales is the author's practice of describing a group of characters bearing the same general features of mind, and placed in the same general circumstances, yet so contrasted with each other in minute differences of mental constitution, that each diverges from the common starting-point into a path peculiar to himself. The brotherhood of villains in *Kenilworth*, of knights in *Ivanhoe*, and of enthusiasts in *Old Mortality*, are instances of this. This bearing of character and plot on each other is not often found in Byron's poems. The Corsair is intended for a remarkable personage. We pass by the inconsistencies of his character, considered by itself. The grand fault is that, whether it be natural or not, we are obliged to accept the author's word for the fidelity of his portrait. We are told, not shown, what the hero was. There is nothing in the plot which results from his peculiar formation of mind. An everyday bravo might equally well have satisfied the requirements of the action. Childe Harold, again, if he is anything, is a being professedly isolated from the world, and uninfluenced by it. One might as well draw Tityrus's stags grazing in the air,¹⁷ as a character of this kind; which yet, with more or less alteration, passes through successive editions in his other poems. Byron had very little versatility or elasticity of genius; he did not know how to make poetry out of existing materials. He declaims in his own way, and has the upper hand as long as he is allowed to go on; but, if interrogated on principles of nature and good sense, he is at once put out and brought to a stand. Yet his conception of Sardanapalus and Myrrha¹⁸ is fine and ideal, and in the style of excellence which we have just been admiring in Shakespeare and Scott.

These illustrations of Aristotle's doctrine may suffice. Now let us proceed to a fresh position; which, as before,

¹⁷ See Vergil, *Eclouges*, i. 59: "The nimble stags shall feed in the air . . . sooner than my look shall pass from his heart."

¹⁸ In the tragedy of *Sardanapalus*.

shall first be broadly stated, then modified and explained. How does originality differ from the poetical talent? Without affecting the accuracy of a definition, we may call the latter the originality of right moral feeling.

Originality may perhaps be defined the power of abstracting for one's self, and is in thought what strength of mind is in action. Our opinions are commonly derived from education and society. Common minds transmit as they receive, good and bad, true and false; minds of original talent feel a continual propensity to investigate subjects and strike out views for themselves; so that even old and established truths do not escape modification and accidental change when subjected to this process of mental digestion. Even the style of original writers is stamped with the peculiarities of their minds. When originality is found apart from good sense, which more or less is frequently the case, it shows itself in paradox and rashness of sentiment, and eccentricity of outward conduct. Poetry, on the other hand, cannot be separated from its good sense, or taste, as it is called; which is one of its elements. It is originality energizing in the world of beauty; the originality of grace, purity, refinement, and good feeling. We do not hesitate to say that poetry is ultimately founded on correct moral perception; that where there is no sound principle in exercise there will be no poetry; and that on the whole (originality being granted) in proportion to the standard of a writer's moral character will his compositions vary in poetical excellence.¹⁹ This position, however, requires some explanation.

Of course, then, we do not mean to imply that a poet must necessarily display virtuous and religious feeling; we are not speaking of the actual material of poetry, but of its sources. A right moral state of heart is the formal and scientific condition of a poetical mind. Nor does it follow from our position that every poet must in fact be a man of consistent and practical principle; except so far as good feeling commonly produces or results from good practice. Burns was a man of inconsistent life; still, it is known, of much really sound principle at bot-

¹⁹ Compare Shelley, p. 307.

tom. Thus his acknowledged poetical talent is in no wise inconsistent with the truth of our doctrine, which will refer the beauty which exists in his compositions to the remains of a virtuous and diviner nature within him. Nay, further than this, our theory holds good, even though it be shown that a depraved man may write a poem. As motives short of the purest lead to actions intrinsically good, so frames of mind short of virtuous will produce a partial and limited poetry. But even where this is instanced, the poetry of a vicious mind will be inconsistent and debased; that is, so far only poetry as the traces and shadows of holy truth still remain upon it. On the other hand, a right moral feeling places the mind in the very center of that circle from which all the rays have their origin and range; whereas minds otherwise placed command but a portion of the whole circuit of poetry. Allowing for human infirmity and the varieties of opinion, Milton, Spenser, Cowper, Wordsworth, and Southey may be considered, as far as their writings go, to approximate to this moral center. The following are added as further illustrations of our meaning. Walter Scott's center is chivalrous honor; Shakespeare exhibits the characteristics of an unlearned and undisciplined piety; Homer the religion of nature and conscience, at times debased by polytheism. All these poets are religious. The occasional irreligion of Virgil's poetry is painful to the admirers of his general taste and delicacy. Dryden's "Alexander's Feast" is a magnificent composition, and has high poetical beauties; but to a refined judgment there is something intrinsically unpoetical in the end to which it is devoted, the praises of revel and sensuality. It corresponds to a process of clever reasoning erected on an untrue foundation—the one is a fallacy, the other is out of taste. Lord Byron's *Manfred* is in parts intensely poetical; yet the delicate mind naturally shrinks from the spirit which here and there reveals itself, and the basis on which the drama is built. From a perusal of it we should infer, according to the above theory, that there was right and fine feeling in the poet's mind, but that the central and consistent character was wanting. From the history of his life we know this to be the fact. The connection between want of the religious principle and want of po-

etical feeling is seen in the instances of Hume and Gibbon, who had radically unpoetical minds. Rousseau, it may be supposed, is an exception to our doctrine. Lucretius, too, had great poetical genius; but his work evinces that his miserable philosophy was rather the result of a bewildered judgment than a corrupt heart.²⁰

According to the above theory, revealed religion should be especially poetical—and it is so in fact. While its disclosures have an originality in them to engage the intellect, they have a beauty to satisfy the moral nature. It presents us with those ideal forms of excellence on which a poetical mind delights, and with which all grace and harmony are associated. It brings us into a new world—a world of overpowering interest, of the sublimest views and the tenderest and purest feelings. The peculiar grace of mind of the New Testament writers is as striking as the actual effect produced upon the hearts of those who have imbibed their spirit. At present we are not concerned with the practical, but the poetical, nature of revealed truth. With Christians, a poetical view of things is a duty,—we are bid to color all things with hues of faith, to see a divine meaning in every event, and a superhuman tendency. Even our friends around are invested with unearthly brightness—no longer imperfect men, but beings taken into divine favor, stamped with His seal, and in training for future happiness. It may be added that the virtues peculiarly Christian are especially poetical²¹—meekness, gentleness, compassion, contentment, modesty, not to mention the devotional virtues; whereas the ruder and more ordinary feelings are the instruments of rhetoric more justly than of poetry,—anger, indignation, emulation, martial spirit, and love of independence.

²⁰ Compare Byron, p. 269.

²¹ Compare Ruskin's saying that poetry presents "noble grounds for the noble emotions," especially "love, veneration, admiration, and joy." (*Modern Painters*, Part iv.)

ON THE KNOCKING AT THE GATE IN
"MACBETH"

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

[First published in the *London Magazine* for October, 1823.]

From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*. It was this:—the knocking at the gate which succeeds to the murder of Duncan¹ produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was that it reflected back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavored with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see *why* it should produce such an effect.

Here I pause for one moment to exhort the reader never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind and the most to be distrusted;² and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else,—which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes. Of this, out of ten thousand instances that I might produce, I will cite one. Ask of any person whatsoever who is not previously prepared for the demand by a knowledge of perspective, to draw in the rudest way the commonest appearance which depends upon the laws of that science—as, for instance, to represent the effect of two walls standing at right angles to each other, or the appearance of the houses on each side of a street, as seen by a person looking down the street from one extremity. Now, in all cases, unless the person has happened to observe in pictures how it is that artists produce these effects, he will be utterly unable to make the smallest approximation to it. Yet why? For he has actually seen the effect every day of his life. The reason is that he allows his understanding to overrule his eyes. His understanding, which includes no intuitive

¹ II, ii, 58-74.² See comment on this passage in the Introduction, p. xxi.

knowledge of the laws of vision, can furnish him with no reason why a line which is known and can be proved to be a horizontal line should not *appear* a horizontal line; a line that made any angle with the perpendicular less than a right angle would seem to him to indicate that his houses were all tumbling down together. Accordingly he makes the line of his houses a horizontal line, and fails of course to produce the effect demanded. Here then is one instance out of many, in which not only the understanding is allowed to overrule the eyes, but where the understanding is positively allowed to obliterate the eyes, as it were; for not only does the man believe the evidence of his understanding in opposition to that of his eyes, but (what is monstrous) the idiot is not aware that his eyes ever gave such evidence. He does not know that he has seen (and therefore *quoad* his consciousness has *not* seen) that which he *has* seen every day of his life.

But to return from this digression. My understanding could furnish no reason why the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* should produce any effect, direct or reflected. In fact, my understanding said positively that it could *not* produce any effect. But I knew better; I felt that it did; and I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it. At length, in 1812, Mr. Williams made his *début* on the stage of Ratcliffe Highway, and executed those unparalleled murders which have procured for him such a brilliant and undying reputation.³ On which murders, by the way, I must observe, that in one respect they have had an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied with anything that has been since done in that line. All other murders look pale by the deep crimson of his; and, as an amateur once said to me in a querulous tone, "There has been absolutely nothing *doing* since his time, or nothing that's worth speaking of." But this is wrong, for it is unreasonable to expect all men to be great artists, and born

³ This quizzical passage represents a kind of permanent, grotesque joke of De Quincey's,—his profession to be a connoisseur in the art of murder,—which finds its most elaborate expression in his essays "On Murder as one of the Fine Arts."

with the genius of Mr. Williams. Now it will be remembered that in the first of these murders (that of the Marrs) the same incident (of a knocking at the door soon after the work of extermination was complete) did actually occur which the genius of Shakespeare has invented; and all good judges, and the most eminent dilettanti, acknowledged the felicity of Shakespeare's suggestion as soon as it was actually realized. Here, then, was a fresh proof that I had been right in relying on my own feeling in opposition to my understanding; and again I set myself to study the problem. At length I solved it to my own satisfaction; and my solution is this:—Murder, in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason,—that it flings the interest exclusively upon the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life; an instinct which, as being indispensable to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind (though different in degree) amongst all living creatures. This instinct, therefore, because it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of "the poor beetle that we tread on," exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. What then must he do? He must throw the interest on the murderer. Our sympathy must be with *him* (of course I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them—not a sympathy of pity or approbation).⁴ In the murdered person all strife of thought, all flux and reflux of passion and of purpose, are crushed by one overwhelming panic; the fear of instant death smites him "with its petrific mace." But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to,

⁴It seems almost ludicrous to guard and explain my use of a word in a situation where it would naturally explain itself. But it has become necessary to do so, in consequence of the unscholar-like use of the word sympathy, at present so general, by which, instead of taking it in its proper sense, as the act of reproducing in our minds the feelings of another, whether for hatred, indignation, love, pity, or approbation, it is made a mere synonym of the word *pity*; and hence, instead of saying, "sympathy *with* another," many writers adopt the monstrous barbarism of "sympathy *for* another." [De Quincey's note.]

there must be raging some great storm of passion—jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred—which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.

In *Macbeth*, for the sake of gratifying his now enormous and teeming faculty of creation, Shakespeare has introduced two murderers; and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated; but—though in *Macbeth* the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and his feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her—yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both. This was to be expressed; and on its own account, as well as to make it a more proportionable antagonist to the unoffending nature of their victim, “the gracious Duncan,” and adequately to expound “the deep damnation of his taking off,” this was to be expressed with peculiar energy. We were to be made to feel that the human nature—i.e., the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man—was gone, vanished, extinct, and that the fiendish nature had taken its place. And, as this effect is marvelously accomplished in the *dialogues* and *soliloquies* themselves, so it is finally consummated by the expedient under consideration; and it is to this that I now solicit the reader’s attention. If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, daughter, or sister, in a fainting fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle is that in which a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life. Or, if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and, chancing to walk near the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully, in the silence and desertion of the streets and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man,—if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns

so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now apply this to the case in *Macbeth*. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed"; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated, relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

O mighty poet! Thy works are not as those of other men, simply and merely great works of art, but are also like the phenomena of nature, like the sun and the sea, the stars and the flowers, like frost and snow, rain and dew, hail-storm and thunder, which are to be studied with entire submission of our own faculties, and in the perfect faith that in them there can be no too much or too little, nothing useless or inert, but that, the farther we press in our discoveries, the more we shall see proofs of

design and self-supporting arrangement where the careless eye had seen nothing but accident!

ON WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

[First published in *Tait's Magazine* for September, 1845, two years after Wordsworth had become Poet Laureate. The opening paragraphs are omitted, as they served only to connect the essay with others which had preceded it.]

Amongst all works that have illustrated our age, none can more deserve an earnest notice than those of the Laureate; and on some grounds, peculiar to themselves, none so much. Their merit in fact is not only supreme, but unique; not only supreme in their general class, but unique as in a class of their own. And there is a challenge of a separate nature to the curiosity of the readers in the remarkable contrast between the first stage of Wordsworth's acception with the public and that which he enjoys at present.

One original obstacle to the favorable impression of the Wordsworthian poetry, and an obstacle purely self-created, was his theory of Poetic Diction. The diction itself, without the theory, was of less consequence; for the mass of readers would have been too blind or too careless to notice it. But the preface to the second edition of his *Poems* (2 vols., 1799-1800) compelled all readers to notice it. Nothing more injudicious was ever done by man. An unpopular truth would, at any rate, have been a bad inauguration for what, on *other* accounts, the author had announced as "an experiment." His poetry was already, and confessedly, an experiment as regarded the quality of the subjects selected, and as regarded the mode of treating them. That was surely trial enough for the reader's untrained sensibilities, without the unpopular novelty besides as to the quality of the diction. But, in the meantime, this novelty, besides being unpopular, was also in part false; it was true, and it was *not* true. And it was not true in a double way. Stating broadly, and allowing

it to be taken for his meaning, that the diction of ordinary life (in his own words, "the very language of men") was the proper diction for poetry, the writer meant no such thing; for only a *part* of this diction, according to his own subsequent restriction, was available for such a use. And, secondly, as his own subsequent practice showed, even this part was available only for peculiar classes of poetry. In his own exquisite "Laodamia," in his Sonnets, in his *Excursion*, few are his obligations to the idiomatic language of life, as distinguished from that of books, or of prescriptive usage. Coleridge remarked, justly, that the *Excursion* bristles beyond most poems with what are called "dictionary" words,—that is, polysyllabic words of Latin or Greek origin. And so it must ever be in meditative poetry upon solemn philosophic themes. The gamut of ideas needs a corresponding gamut of expressions; the scale of the thinking which ranges through *every* key exacts, for the artist, an unlimited command over the entire scale of the instrument which he employs. Never, in fact, was there a more erroneous direction—one falser in its grounds, or more ruinous in its tendency—than that given by a modern Rector of Glasgow University¹ to the students,—viz., that they should cultivate the Saxon part of our language rather than the Latin part. Nonsense. Both are indispensable; and, speaking generally, without stopping to distinguish as to subjects, both are *equally* indispensable. Pathos, in situations which are homely, or at all connected with domestic affections, naturally moves by Saxon words. Lyrical emotion of every kind, which (to merit the name *lyrical*) must be in the state of flux and reflux, or, generally, of agitation, also requires the Saxon element of our language. And why? Because the Saxon is the aboriginal element,—the basis, and not the superstructure; consequently it comprehends all the ideas which are natural to the heart of man, and to the *elementary* situations of life. And, although the Latin often furnishes us with duplicates of these ideas, yet the Saxon, or monosyllabic part, has the advantage of prece-
dency in our use and knowledge; for it is the language of the nursery, whether for rich or poor,—in which great

¹ Lord Brougham.

philological academy no toleration is given to words in *-osity* or *-ation*. There is, therefore, a great advantage, as regards the consecration to our feelings, settled, by usage and custom, upon the Saxon strands in the mixed yarn of our native tongue. And, universally, this may be remarked—that, wherever the passion of a poem is of that sort which *uses*, *presumes*, or *postulates* the ideas, without seeking to extend them, Saxon will be the “cocoon” (to speak by the language applied to silkworms) which the poem spins for itself. But, on the other hand, where the motion of the feeling is *by* and *through* the ideas, where (as in religious or meditative poetry—Young’s, for instance, or Cowper’s) the sentiment creeps and kindles underneath the very tissues of the thinking, there the Latin will predominate; and so much so that, whilst the flesh, the blood, and the muscle will be often almost exclusively Latin, the articulations or hinges of connection and transition will be Anglo-Saxon.

But a blunder, more perhaps from thoughtlessness and careless reading than from malice, on the part of the professional critics, ought to have roused Wordsworth into a firmer feeling of the entire question. These critics had fancied that, in Wordsworth’s estimate, whatsoever was plebeian was also poetically just in diction—not as though the impassioned phrase were sometimes the vernacular phrase, but as though the vernacular phrase were universally the impassioned. They naturally went on to suggest, as a corollary which Wordsworth (as they fancied) could not refuse, that Dryden and Pope must be translated into the flash diction of prisons and the slang of streets before they could be regarded as poetically costumed. Now, so far as these critics were concerned, the answer would have been simply to say that much in the poets mentioned, but especially of the racy Dryden, actually *is* in that vernacular diction for which Wordsworth contended, and, for the other part, which is *not*, frequently it *does* require the very purgation (if that were possible) which the critics were presuming to be so absurd. In Pope, and sometimes in Dryden, there is so much of the unfeeling and the prescriptive diction which Wordsworth denounced. During the eighty years between 1660 and 1740 grew up that scrofulous taint in

our diction which was denounced by Wordsworth as technically received for "poetic language"; and, if Dryden and Pope were less infected than others, this was merely because their understandings were finer. Much there is in both poets, as regards diction, which *does* require correction, and correction of the kind presumed by Wordsworth's theory. And if, so far, the critics should resist Wordsworth's principle of reform, not he, but they, would have been found the patrons of deformity. This course would soon have turned the tables upon the critics. For the poets, or the class of poets, whom they unwisely selected as models susceptible of no correction, happen to be those who chiefly require it. But their foolish selection ought not to have intercepted or clouded the true question when put in another shape, since in this shape it opens into a very troublesome dilemma. Spenser, Shakespeare, the Bible of 1611, and Milton—how say you, William Wordsworth—are these sound and true as to diction, or are they not? If you say they are, then what is it that you are proposing to change? What room for a revolution? Would you, as Sancho says, have "better bread than is made of wheat"? But, if you say No, they are *not* sound, then, indeed, you open a fearful range to your own artillery, but in a war greater than you could, by any possibility, have contemplated. In the first case,—that is, if the leading classics of the English literature are, in quality of diction and style, loyal to the canons of sound taste,—then you cut away the *locus standi* for yourself as a reformer: the reformation applies only to secondary and recent abuses. In the second case, if they also are faulty, you undertake an *onus* of hostility so vast that you will be found fighting against stars.² . . .

It is the vulgar superstition in behalf of big books and sounding pretensions that must have prevailed upon Coleridge and others to undervalue, by comparison with the direct philosophic poetry of Wordsworth, those earlier poems which are all short, but generally scintillating with gems of far profounder truth. I speak of that truth which strengthens into solemnity an impression very

² In the omitted pages De Quincey discusses *The Ecursion*.

feebly acknowledged previously, or truth which suddenly unveils a connection between objects hitherto regarded as irrelate and independent. In astronomy, to gain the rank of discoverer, it is not required that you should reveal a star absolutely new: find out with respect to an old star some new affection—as, for instance, that it has an ascertainable parallax—and immediately you bring it within the verge of a human interest; or, with respect to some old familiar planet, that its satellites suffer periodical eclipses, and immediately you bring it within the verge of terrestrial uses. Gleams of steadier vision that brighten into certainty appearances else doubtful, or that unfold relations else unsuspected, are not less discoveries of truth than the downright revelations of the telescope, or the absolute conquests of the diving-bell. It is astonishing how large a harvest of new truths would be reaped simply through the accident of a man's feeling, or being made to feel, more *deeply* than other men. He sees the same objects, neither more nor fewer, but he sees them engraved in lines far stronger and more determinate: and the difference in the strength makes the whole difference between consciousness and subconsciousness. And in questions of the mere understanding we see the same fact illustrated. The author who wins notice the most is not he that perplexes men by truths drawn from fountains of absolute novelty,—truths as yet unsunned, and from that cause obscure,—but he that awakens into illuminated consciousness ancient lineaments of truth long slumbering in the mind, although too faint to have exerted attention. Wordsworth has brought many a truth into life, both for the eye and for the understanding, which previously had slumbered indistinctly for all men.

For instance, as respects the eye, who does not acknowledge instantaneously the magical strength of truth in his saying of a cataract seen from a station two miles off that it was “frozen by distance”?³ In all nature there is not an object so essentially at war with the stiffening of frost as the headlong and desperate life of a cataract; and yet notoriously the effect of distance is to lock up this frenzy of motion into the most petrific column of still-

³ From “Address to Kilchurn Castle.”

ness. This effect is perceived at once when pointed out; but how few are the eyes that ever would have perceived it for themselves! Twilight, again—who before Wordsworth ever distinctly noticed its *abstracting* power?—that power of removing, softening, harmonizing, by which a mode of obscurity executes for the eye the same mysterious office which the mind, so often, within its own shadowy realms, executes for itself. In the dim interspace between day and night all disappears from our earthly scenery, as if touched by an enchanter's rod, which is either mean or inharmonious, or unquiet, or expressive of temporary things. Leaning against a column of rock, looking down upon a lake or river, and at intervals carrying your eyes forward through a vista of mountains, you become aware that your sight rests upon the very same spectacle, unaltered in a single feature, which once at the same hour was beheld by the legionary Roman from his embattled camp, or by the roving Briton in his "wolf-skin vest," lying down to sleep, and looking

Through some leafy bower,
Before his eyes were closed.

How magnificent is the summary or abstraction of the elementary features in such a scene, as executed by the poet himself, in illustration of this abstraction daily executed by Nature through her handmaid Twilight! Listen, reader, to the closing strain, solemn as twilight is solemn, and grand as the spectacle which it describes:

By him [i. e. the roving Briton] was seen
The self-same vision which we now behold,
At thy meek bidding, shadowy Power, brought forth;
These mighty barriers and the gulf between;
The flood, the stars—a spectacle as old
As the beginning of the heavens and earth.*

Another great field there is amongst the pomps of nature, which, if Wordsworth did not first notice, he certainly has noticed most circumstantially. I speak of cloud-scenery, or those pageants of sky-built architecture

* From the sonnet, "Hail Twilight, sovereign of one peaceful hour."

which sometimes in summer, at noonday, and in all seasons about sunset, arrest or appal the meditative; "perplexing monarchs" with the spectacles of armies maneuvering, or deepening the solemnity of evening by towering edifices that mimic—but which also in mimicking mock—the transitory grandeurs of man. It is singular that these gorgeous phenomena, not less than those of the Aurora Borealis, have been so little noticed by the poets. The Aurora was naturally neglected by the southern poets of Greece and Rome, as not much seen in their latitudes.⁵ But the cloud-architecture of the daylight belongs alike to north and south. Accordingly, I remember one notice of it in Hesiod,—a case where the clouds exhibited

The beauteous semblance of a flock at rest.

Another there is, a thousand years later, in Lucan: amongst the portents which that poet notices as prefiguring the dreadful convulsions destined to shake the earth at Pharsalia, I remember some fiery coruscation of arms in the heavens;⁶ but, so far as I recollect, the appearances might have belonged equally to the workmanship of the clouds or the Aurora. Up and down the next eight hundred years are scattered evanescent allusions to these vapory appearances; in *Hamlet* and elsewhere occur gleams of such allusions; but I remember no distinct sketch of such an appearance before that in the *Antony and Cleopatra* of Shakespeare, beginning

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish.⁷

⁵ But then, says the reader, why was it not proportionably the more noticed by poets of the north? Certainly that question is fair. And the answer, it is scarcely possible to doubt, is this: that until the rise of natural philosophy in Charles II's reign *there was no name for the appearance*; on which account some writers have been absurd enough to believe that the Aurora did not exist, noticeably, until about 1690. Shakespeare, in his journeys down to Stratford (always performed on horseback), must often have been belated: he must sometimes have seen, he could not but have admired, the fiery skirmishing of the Aurora. And yet, for want of a word to fix and identify the gorgeous phenomenon, how could he introduce it as an image, or even as the subject of an allusion, in his writings? [De Quincey's note.]

⁶ *Pharsalia*, vii, 155: "Adversasque faces immensoque igne columnas."

⁷ IV, xiv, 2.

Subsequently to Shakespeare, these notices, as of all phenomena whatsoever that demanded a familiarity with nature in the spirit of love, became rarer and rarer. At length, as the eighteenth century was winding up its accounts, forth stepped William Wordsworth; of whom, as a reader of all pages in nature, it may be said that, if we except Dampier,⁸ the admirable buccaneer, the gentle *filibustier*, and some few professional naturalists, he first and he last looked at natural objects with the eye that neither will be dazzled from without nor cheated by preconceptions from within. Most men look at nature in the hurry of a confusion that distinguishes nothing; *their* error is from without. Pope, again, and many who live in towns,⁹ make such blunders as that of supposing the moon to tip with the silver the hills *behind* which she is rising, not by erroneous use of their eyes (for they use them not at all), but by inveterate preconceptions. Scarcely has there been a poet with what could be called a learned eye, or an eye *extensively* learned, before Wordsworth. Much affectation there has been of that sort since his rise, and at all times much counterfeit enthusiasm; but the sum of the matter is this,—that Wordsworth had his passion for nature fixed in his blood; it was a necessity, like that of the mulberry-leaf to the silkworm; and through his commerce with nature did he live and breathe. Hence it was—viz. from the *truth* of his love—that his knowledge grew; whilst most others, being merely hypocrites in their love, have turned out merely sciolists in their knowledge. This chapter, therefore, of *sky-scenery* may be said to have been revived amongst the resources of poetry by Wordsworth—rekindled, if not absolutely kindled. The sublime scene endorsed upon the draperies of the storm in the fourth book

⁸ An English freebooting explorer (1652-1715), who published a *Voyage Round the World* and a *Discourse on the Winds*.

⁹ It was not, however, that all poets then lived in towns; neither had Pope himself generally lived in towns. But it is perfectly useless to be familiar with nature unless there is a public trained to love and value nature. It is not what the individual sees that will fix itself as beautiful in his recollections, but what he sees under a consciousness that others will sympathize with his feelings. Under any other circumstances familiarity does but realize the adage, and "breeds contempt." The great despisers of rural scenery, its fixed and permanent undervaluers, are rustics. [De Quincey's note.]

of the *Excursion*—that scene again witnessed upon the passage of the Hamilton Hills in Yorkshire—the solemn “sky prospect” from the fields of France,—are unrivaled in that order of composition; and in one of these records Wordsworth has given first of all the true key-note of the sentiment belonging to these grand pageants. They are, says the poet, speaking in a case where the appearance had occurred towards night,

Meek nature's evening comment on the shows
And all the fuming vanities of earth.¹⁰

Yes, that is the secret moral whispered to the mind. These mimicries express the laughter which is in heaven at earthly pomps. Frail and vapory are the glories of man, even as the visionary parodies of those glories are frail, even as the scenical copies of those glories are frail, which nature weaves in clouds.

As another of those natural appearances which must have haunted men's eyes since the Flood, but yet had never forced itself into conscious notice until arrested by Wordsworth, I may notice an effect of *iteration* daily exhibited in the habits of cattle:

The cattle are grazing,
Their heads never raising;
There are forty feeding as one.¹¹

Now, merely as a *fact*, and if it were nothing more, this characteristic appearance in the habits of cows, when all repeat the action of each, ought not to have been overlooked by those who profess themselves engaged in holding up a mirror to nature. But the fact has also a profound meaning as a hieroglyphic. In all animals which live under the protection of man a life of peace and quietness, but do not share in his labors or in his pleasures, what we regard is the species, and not the individual. Nobody but a grazier ever looks at one cow amongst a field of cows, or at one sheep in a flock. But, as to those animals which are more closely connected with man,—not passively connected, but actively, being partners in his

¹⁰ From the sonnet, “Sky-Prospect from the Plain of France.”

¹¹ From lines “Written in March.”

toils, and perils, and recreations, such as horses, dogs, and falcons,—they are regarded as individuals, and are allowed the benefit of an individual interest. It is not that cows have not a differential character, each for herself; and sheep, it is well known, have all a separate physiognomy for the shepherd who has cultivated their acquaintance. But men generally have no opportunity or motive for studying the individualities of creatures, however otherwise respectable, that are too much regarded by all of us in the reversionary light of milk, and beef, and mutton. Far otherwise it is with horses, who share in man's martial risks, who sympathize with man's frenzy in hunting, who divide with man the burdens of noonday. Far otherwise it is with dogs, that share the hearths of man, and adore the footsteps of his children. These man loves; of these he makes dear, though humble, friends. These often fight for him; and for them he reciprocally will sometimes fight. Of necessity, therefore, every horse and every dog is an individual—has a sort of personality that makes him separately interesting—has a beauty and a character of his own. Go to Melton,¹² therefore, on some crimson morning, and what will you see? Every man, every horse, every dog, glorying in the plenitude of life, is in a different attitude, motion, gesture, action. It is not there the sublime unity which you must seek, where forty are like one; but the sublime infinity, like that of ocean, like that of Flora, like that of nature, where no repetitions are endured, no leaf is the copy of another leaf, no absolute identity, and no painful tautologies. This subject might be pursued into profounder recesses; but in a popular discussion it is necessary to forbear.

A volume might be filled with such glimpses of novelty as Wordsworth has first laid bare, even to the apprehension of the senses. For the understanding, when moving in the same track of human sensibilities, he has done only not so much. How often (to give an instance or two) must the human heart have felt the case, and yearned for an expression of the case, when there are sorrows which descend far below the region in which tears gather; and yet who has ever given utterance to this feeling until Wordsworth came with his immortal line:

¹² Melton Mowbray, in Leicestershire, noted for fox-hunting.

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.¹³

This sentiment, and others that might be adduced (such as "The child is father to the man"), have even passed into the popular heart, and are often quoted by those who know not whom they are quoting. Magnificent, again, is the sentiment, and yet an echo to one which lurks amongst all hearts, in relation to the frailty of merely human schemes for working good, which so often droop and collapse through the unsteadiness of human energies,—

Foundations must be laid

In heaven.¹⁴

How? Foundations laid in realms that are *above*? But that is impossible; that is at war with elementary physics; foundations must be laid *below*. Yes; and even so the poet throws the mind yet more forcibly on the hyper-physical character—on the grandeur transcending all physics—of those spiritual and shadowy foundations which alone are enduring.

But the great distinction of Wordsworth, and the pledge of his increasing popularity, is the extent of his sympathy with what is really permanent in human feelings, and also the depth of this sympathy. Young and Cowper, the two earlier leaders in the province of meditative poetry, are too circumscribed in the range of their sympathies, too narrow, too illiberal, and too exclusive. Both these poets manifested the quality of their strength in the quality of their public reception. Popular in some degree from the first, they entered upon the inheritance of their fame almost at once. Far different was the fate of Wordsworth; for in poetry of this class, which appeals to what lies deepest in man, in proportion to the native power of the poet, and his fitness for permanent life, is the strength of resistance in the public taste. Whatever is too original will be hated at the first. It must slowly mould a public for itself;¹⁵ and the resistance of the early

¹³ "Intimations of Immortality," last line.

¹⁴ From the sonnet "Malham Cove."

¹⁵ Wordsworth's own doctrine. Compare his "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*: "Every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." He adds that this is an observation of Coleridge's.

thoughtless judgments must be overcome by a counter-resistance to itself in a better audience slowly mustering against the first. Forty and seven years it is since William Wordsworth first appeared as an author. Twenty of those years he was the scoff of the world, and his poetry a byword of scorn. Since then, and more than once, senates have rung with acclamations to the echo of his name. Now, at this moment, whilst we are talking about him, he has entered upon his seventy-sixth year. For himself, according to the course of nature, he cannot be far from his setting; but his poetry is only now clearing the clouds that gathered about its rising. Meditative poetry is perhaps that province of literature which will ultimately maintain most power amongst the generations which are coming; but in this department, at least, there is little competition to be apprehended by Wordsworth from anything that has appeared since the death of Shakespeare.

LITERATURE OF KNOWLEDGE AND LITERATURE OF POWER

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

[This selection is a portion of an essay on Pope, which appeared in the *North British Review* for August, 1848. Twenty-five years earlier De Quincey had set forth the same distinction in his *Letters to a Young Man*.]

What is it that we mean by *literature*? Popularly, and amongst the thoughtless, it is held to include everything that is printed in a book. Little logic is required to disturb *that* definition. The most thoughtless person is easily made aware that in the idea of *literature* one essential element is some relation to a general and common interest of man,—so that what applies only to a local, or professional, or merely personal interest, even though presenting itself in the shape of a book, will not belong to Literature. So far the definition is easily narrowed; and it is as easily expanded. For not only is much that takes a station in books not literature, but inversely, much that really *is* literature never reaches a station in books. The

weekly sermons of Christendom, that vast pulpit literature which acts so extensively upon the popular mind—to warn, to uphold, to renew, to comfort, to alarm—does not attain the sanctuary of libraries in the ten-thousandth part of its extent. The drama again,—as, for instance, the finest part of Shakespeare's plays in England, and all leading Athenian plays in the noontide of the Attic stage,—operated as a literature on the public mind, and were (according to the strictest letter of that term) *published* through the audiences that witnessed their representation some time before they were published as things to be read; and they were published in this scenical mode of publication with much more effect than they could have had as books during ages of costly copying or of costly printing.

Books, therefore, do not suggest an idea coextensive and interchangeable with the idea of literature; since much literature, scenic, forensic, or didactic (as from lecturers and public orators), may never come into books, and much that does come into books may connect itself with no literary interest. But a far more important correction, applicable to the common vague idea of literature, is to be sought not so much in a better definition of literature as in a sharper distinction of the two functions which it fulfils. In that great social organ which, collectively, we call literature, there may be distinguished two separate offices; that may blend and often do so, but capable, severally, of a severe insulation, and naturally fitted for reciprocal repulsion. There is, first, the literature of *knowledge*, and secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is to *teach*; the function of the second is to *move*; the first is a rudder, the second an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the mere discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always through affections of pleasure and sympathy. Remotely, it may travel towards an object seated in what Lord Bacon calls "dry light";¹ but proximately it does and must operate—else it ceases to be a literature of power—on and through

¹ "Heraclitus the obscure said: The dry light was the best soul. Meaning, when the faculties intellectual are in vigour, not wet, nor, as it were, blooded by the affections." (Bacon's *Apophthegms*, 268.)

that *humid* light which clothes itself in the mists and glittering iris of human passions, desires, and genial emotions. Men have so little reflected on the higher functions of literature as to find it a paradox if one should describe it as a mean or subordinate purpose of books to give information. But this is a paradox only in the sense which makes it honorable to be paradoxical. Whenever we talk in ordinary language of seeking information or gaining knowledge, we understand the words as connected with something of absolute novelty. But it is the grandeur of all truth which can occupy a very high place in human interests that it is never absolutely novel to the meanest of minds; it exists eternally by way of germ or latent principle in the lowest as in the highest, needing to be developed, but never to be planted. To be capable of transplantation is the immediate criterion of a truth that ranges on a lower scale. Besides which, there is a rarer thing than truth,—namely *power*, or deep sympathy with truth. What is the effect, for instance, upon society of children? By the pity, by the tenderness, and by the peculiar modes of admiration which connect themselves with the helplessness, with the innocence, and with the simplicity of children, not only are the primal affections strengthened and continually renewed, but the qualities which are dearest in the sight of heaven—the frailty, for instance, which appeals to forbearance, the innocence which symbolizes the heavenly, and the simplicity which is most alien from the worldly—are kept up in perpetual remembrance, and their ideals are continually refreshed. A purpose of the same nature is answered by the higher literature, viz. the literature of power. What do you learn from *Paradise Lost*? Nothing at all. What do you learn from a cookery-book? Something new, something that you did not know before, in every paragraph. But would you therefore put the wretched cookery-book on a higher level of estimation than the divine poem? What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge, of which a million separate items are still but a million of advancing steps on the same earthly level; what you owe is *power*,—that is, exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx

- is a step upwards, a step ascending as upon a Jacob's ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above the earth. All the steps of knowledge, from first to last, carry you further on the same plane, but could never raise you one foot above your ancient level of earth; whereas the very first step in power is a flight—is an ascending movement into another element where earth is forgotten.

Were it not that human sensibilities are ventilated and continually called out into exercise by the great phenomena of infancy, or of real life as it moves through chance and change, or of literature as it recombines these elements in the mimics of poetry, romance, etc., it is certain that, like any animal power or muscular energy falling into disuse, all such sensibilities would gradually droop and dwindle. It is in relation to these great *moral* capacities of man that the literature of power, as contradistinguished from that of knowledge, lives and has its field of action. It is concerned with what is highest in man; for the Scriptures themselves never condescended to deal by suggestion or cooperation with the mere discursive understanding: when speaking of man in his intellectual capacity, the Scriptures speak not of the understanding, but of "the understanding heart,"—making the heart, i.e., the great *intuitive* (or non-discursive) organ, to be the interchangeable formula for man in his highest state of capacity for the infinite. Tragedy, romance, fairy tale, or epopee, all alike restore to man's mind the ideals of justice, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of retribution, which else (left to the support of daily life in its realities) would languish for want of sufficient illustration.

What is meant, for instance, by *poetic justice*? It does not mean a justice that differs by its object from the ordinary justice of human jurisprudence, for then it must be confessedly a very bad kind of justice; but it means a justice that differs from common forensic justice by the degree in which it attains its object,—a justice that is more omnipotent over its own ends, as dealing, not with the refractory elements of earthly life, but with the elements of its own creation, and with materials flexible to its own purest preconceptions. It is certain that, were it not for the literature of power, these ideals would often

remain amongst us as mere arid notional forms; whereas, by the creative forces of man put forth in literature, they gain a vernal life of restoration, and germinate into vital activities. The commonest novel, by moving in alliance with human fears and hopes, with human instincts of wrong and right, sustains and quickens those affections. Calling them into action, it rescues them from torpor. And hence the præminency over all authors that merely *teach*, of the meanest that moves, or that teaches, if at all, indirectly by moving. The very highest work that has ever existed in the literature of knowledge is but a provisional work,—a book upon trial and sufferance, and *quamdiu bene se gesserit*.² Let its teaching be even partially revised, let it be but expanded,—nay, even let its teaching be but placed in a better order,—and instantly it is superseded. Whereas the feeblest works in the literature of power, surviving at all, survive as finished and unalterable amongst men. For instance, the *Principia* of Sir Isaac Newton was a book militant on earth from the first. In all stages of its progress it would have to fight for its existence; first, as regards absolute truth; secondly, when that combat was over, as regards its form or mode of presenting the truth. And as soon as a Laplace, or anybody else, builds higher upon the foundations laid by this book, effectually he throws it out of the sunshine into decay and darkness; by weapons won from this book he superannuates and destroys this book, so that soon the name of Newton remains as a mere *nominis umbra*, but his book, as a living power, has transmigrated into other forms. Now, on the contrary, the *Iliad*, the *Prometheus* of Æschylus, the *Othello* or *King Lear*, the *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, and the *Paradise Lost*, are not militant, but triumphant for ever, as long as the languages exist in which they speak or can be taught to speak. They never *can* transmigrate into new incarnations. To reproduce these in new forms, or variations, even if in some things they should be improved, would be to plagiarize. A good steam-engine is properly superseded by a better. But one lovely pastoral valley is not superseded by another, nor a statue of Praxiteles by

² "As long as it behaves itself."

a statue of Michael Angelo. These things are separated not by imparity, but by disparity. They are not thought of as unequal under the same standard, but as different in *kind*, and, if otherwise equal, as equal under a different standard. Human works of immortal beauty and works of nature in one respect stand on the same footing: they never absolutely repeat each other, never approach so near as not to differ, and they differ not as better and worse, or simply by more and less,—they differ by undecipherable and incommunicable differences, that cannot be caught by mimicries, that cannot be reflected in the mirror of copies, that cannot become ponderable in the scales of vulgar comparison.

Applying these principles to Pope as a representative of fine literature in general, we would wish to remark the claim which he has, or which any equal writer has, to the attention and jealous winnowing of those critics in particular who watch over public morals. Clergymen, and all organs of public criticism put in motion by clergymen, are more especially concerned in the just appreciation of such writers, if the two canons are remembered which we have endeavored to illustrate, viz., that all works in this class, as opposed to those in the literature of knowledge, first, work by far deeper agencies, and secondly, are more permanent; in the strictest sense they are *κτῆματα ἐς αἰ:*³ and what evil they do, or what good they do, is commensurate with the national language, sometimes long after the nation has departed. At this hour, five hundred years since their creation, the tales of Chaucer, never equaled on this earth for their tenderness, and for life of picturesqueness, are read familiarly by many in the charming language of their natal day, and by others in the modernizations of Dryden, of Pope, and Wordsworth. At this hour, one thousand eight hundred years since their creation, the pagan tales of Ovid, never equaled on this earth for the gayety of their movement and the capricious graces of their narrative, are read by all Christendom. This man's people and their monuments are dust; but *he* is alive: he has survived them, as he told us that he had it in his

³ "Possessions forever." (From Thucydides's Preface to his History.)

commission to do,⁴ by a thousand years; "and *shall* a thousand more."

All the literature of knowledge builds only ground-nests, that are swept away by floods, or confounded by the plough; but the literature of power builds nests in aerial altitudes of temples sacred from violation, or of forests inaccessible to fraud. This is a great prerogative of the *power* literature; and it is a greater which lies in the mode of its influence. The *knowledge* literature, like the fashion of this world, passeth away. An encyclopedia is its abstract; and, in this respect, it may be taken for its speaking symbol—that before one generation has passed an encyclopedia is superannuated; for it speaks through the dead memory and unimpassioned understanding, which have not the repose of higher faculties, but are continually enlarging and varying their phylacteries. But all literature properly so called—literature, *κατ' ἐξοχήν*—⁵ for the very reason that it is so much more durable than the literature of knowledge, is (and by the very same proportion it is) more intense and electrically searching in its impressions. The directions in which the tragedy of this planet has trained our human feelings to play, and the combinations into which the poetry of this planet has thrown our human passions of love and hatred, of admiration and contempt, exercise a power for bad or good over human life that cannot be contemplated, when stretching through many generations, without a sentiment allied to awe.⁶ And of this let every one be assured—that

⁴ *Metamorphoses*, xv, 876-79:

Cum volet illa dies, quae nil nisi corporis hujus
Jus habet, incerti spatium mihi finiat aevi;
Parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis
Astra ferar nomenque erit indelebile nostrum.

("Let that day which has no power but over this body of mine put an end to the term of my uncertain life when it will; yet in my better part I shall be raised immortal above the lofty stars, and indestructible shall be my name.")

⁵ *Par excellence*.

⁶ The reason why the broad distinctions between the two literatures of power and knowledge so little fix the attention lies in the fact that a vast proportion of books,—history, biography, travels, miscellaneous essays, etc.—lying in a middle zone, confound these distinctions by interblending them. All that we call "amusement" or "entertainment" is a diluted form of the power belonging to passion, and also a mixed form; and, where threads of direct *instruction* intermingle in the texture with these threads of *power*, this absorption of the duality into one representative *nuance neu-*

he owes to the impassioned books which he has read many a thousand more of emotions than he can consciously trace back to them. Dim by their origination, these emotions yet arise in him, and mould him through life, like forgotten incidents of his childhood.

THE DOCTRINE OF "CORRECTNESS"

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

[This selection is a portion of Macaulay's review of Moore's *Life of Byron*; it appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for June, 1831.]

Wherein especially does the poetry of our times differ from that of the last century? Ninety-nine persons out of a hundred would answer that the poetry of the last century was correct, but cold and mechanical, and that the poetry of our time, though wild and irregular, presented far more vivid images and excited the passions far more strongly than that of Parnell, of Addison, or of Pope. In the same manner we constantly hear it said that the poets of the age of Elizabeth had far more genius, but far less correctness, than those of the age of Anne. It seems to be taken for granted that there is some incompatibility, some antithesis, between correctness and creative power. We rather suspect that this notion arises merely from an abuse of words, and that it has been the parent of many of the fallacies which perplex the science of criticism.

What is meant by correctness in poetry? If by correctness be meant the conforming to rules which have their foundation in truth and in the principles of human nature, then correctness is only another name for excellence. If by correctness be meant the conforming to rules purely arbitrary, correctness may be another name for dulness and absurdity.

A writer who describes visible objects falsely, and violates the propriety of character, a writer who makes the

tralizes the separate perception of either. Fused into a *tertium quid*, or neutral state, they disappear to the popular eye as the repelling forces which, in fact, they are. [De Quincey's note.]

mountains "nod their drowsy heads" at night, or a dying man take leave of the world with a rant like that of Maximin,¹ may be said, in the high and just sense of the phrase, to write incorrectly. He violates the first great law of his art. His imitation is altogether unlike the thing imitated. The four poets who are most eminently free from incorrectness of this description are Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton. They are therefore, in one sense, and that the best sense, the most correct of poets.

When it is said that Virgil, though he had less genius than Homer, was a more correct writer, what sense is attached to the word correctness? Is it meant that the story of the *Æneid* is developed more skilfully than that of the *Odyssey*? that the Roman describes the face of the external world, or the emotions of the mind, more accurately than the Greek? that the characters of Achates and Mnestheus are more nicely discriminated, and more consistently supported, than those of Achilles, of Nestor, and of Ulysses? The fact incontestably is that, for every violation of the fundamental laws of poetry which can be found in Homer, it would be easy to find twenty in Virgil.

Troilus and Cressida is perhaps of all the plays of Shakespeare that which is commonly considered as the most incorrect. Yet it seems to us infinitely more correct, in the sound sense of the term, than what are called the most correct plays of the most correct dramatists. Compare it, for example, with the *Iphigénie* of Racine. We are sure that the Greeks of Shakespeare bear a far greater resemblance than the Greeks of Racine to the real Greeks who besieged Troy; and for this reason, that the Greeks of Shakespeare are human beings, and the Greeks of Racine mere names, mere words printed in capitals at the head of paragraphs of declamation.² Racine, it is true, would have shuddered at the thought of making a warrior at the siege of Troy quote Aristotle. But of what use is it to avoid a single anachronism, when the whole play is one anachronism, the sentiments and phrases of Versailles in the camp of Aulis?

¹ In Dryden's *Tyrannic Love*.

² Compare Hazlitt, p. 250.

In the sense in which we are now using the word correctness, we think that Sir Walter Scott, Mr. Wordsworth, Mr. Coleridge, are far more correct poets than those who are commonly extolled as the models of correctness,—Pope, for example, and Addison. The single description of a moonlight night in Pope's *Iliad*³ contains more inaccuracies than can be found in all the *Excursion*. There is not a single scene in *Cato*⁴ in which all that conduces to poetical illusion, all the propriety of character, of language, of situation, is not more grossly violated than in any part of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. No man can possibly think that the Romans of Addison resemble the real Romans so closely as the moss-troopers of Scott resemble the real moss-troopers. Wat Tinlinn and William of Deloraine are not, it is true, persons of so much dignity as Cato. But the dignity of the persons represented has as little to do with the correctness of poetry as with the correctness of painting. We prefer a gypsy by Reynolds to His Majesty's head on a signpost, and a Borderer by Scott to a senator by Addison.

In what sense, then, is the word correctness used by those who say, with the author of *The Pursuits of Literature*,⁵ that Pope was the most correct of English poets, and that next to Pope came the late Mr. Gifford? What is the nature and value of that correctness the praise of which is denied to *Macbeth*, to *Lear*, and to *Othello*, and given to Hoole's translations and to all the Seatonian prize-poems?⁶ We can discover no eternal rule, no rule founded in reason and in the nature of things, which Shakespeare does not observe much more strictly than Pope. But if by correctness be meant the conforming

³ Book viii, conclusion. Wordsworth had written to the same effect, in his "Essay Supplementary": "To what a low state knowledge of the most obvious and important phenomena had sunk, is evident from the style in which Dryden has executed a description of night in one of his tragedies, and Pope his translation of the celebrated moonlight scene in the *Iliad*. A blind man, in the habit of attending accurately to descriptions casually dropped from the lips of those around him, might easily depict these appearances with more truth."

⁴ By Addison (1713). Compare Leigh Hunt, p. 388.

⁵ A literary satire by T. J. Mathias (1794).

⁶ John Hoole (1727-1803) translated works of Tasso, Ariosto, and Metastasio into English verse. The Seatonian prize has been awarded at Cambridge University since 1750, for the best competing poem on a sacred subject.

to a narrow legislation which, while lenient to the *mala in se*, multiplies without the shadow of a reason the *mala prohibita*,—if by correctness be meant a strict attention to certain ceremonious observances, which are no more essential to poetry than etiquette to good government, or than the washings of a Pharisee to devotion,—then, assuredly, Pope may be a more correct poet than Shakespeare; and, if the code were a little altered, Colley Cibber might be a more correct poet than Pope. But it may well be doubted whether this kind of correctness be a merit, nay, whether it be not an absolute fault.

It would be amusing to make a digest of the irrational laws which bad critics have framed for the government of poets. First in celebrity and in absurdity stand the dramatic unities of place and time. No human being has ever been able to find anything that could, even by courtesy, be called an argument for these unities, except that they have been deduced from the general practice of the Greeks. It requires no very profound examination to discover that the Greek dramas, often admirable as compositions, are, as exhibitions of human character and human life, far inferior to the English plays of the age of Elizabeth. Every scholar knows that the dramatic part of the Athenian tragedies was at first subordinate to the lyrical part. It would, therefore, have been little less than a miracle if the laws of the Athenian stage had been found to suit plays in which there was no chorus. All the greatest masterpieces of the dramatic art have been composed in direct violation of the unities, and could never have been composed if the unities had not been violated. It is clear, for example, that such a character as that of Hamlet could never have been developed within the limits to which Alfieri⁷ confined himself. Yet such was the reverence of literary men during the last century for the unities, that Johnson, who, much to his honor, took the opposite side, was, as he says, "frightened at his own temerity," and "afraid to stand against the authorities which might be produced against him."⁸

There are other rules of the same kind, without end. "Shakespeare," says Rymer, "ought not to have made

⁷ An Italian writer of classical tragedies (1749-1803).

⁸ In the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare.

Othello black; for the hero of a tragedy ought always to be white."⁹ "Milton," says another critic, "ought not to have taken Adam for his hero; for the hero of an epic poem ought always to be victorious." "Milton," says another, "ought not to have put so many similes into his first book; for the first book of an epic poem ought always to be the most unadorned. There are no similes in the first book of the *Iliad*." "Milton," says another, "ought not to have placed in an epic poem such lines as these:

While thus I called, and strayed I knew not whither."

And why not? The critic is ready with a reason—a lady's reason. "Such lines," says he, "are not, it must be allowed, unpleasing to the ear; but the redundant syllable ought to be confined to the drama, and not admitted into epic poetry." As to the redundant syllable in heroic rhyme on serious subjects, it has been, from the time of Pope downward, proscribed by the general consent of all the correct school. No magazine would have admitted so incorrect a couplet as that of Drayton:

As when we lived untouch'd with these disgraces,
When as our kingdom was our dear embraces.¹⁰

Another law of heroic rhyme which, fifty years ago, was considered as fundamental, was that there should be a pause, a comma at least, at the end of every couplet. It was also provided that there should never be a full stop except at the end of a line. Well do we remember to have heard a most correct judge of poetry revile Mr. Rogers for the incorrectness of that most sweet and graceful passage,—

Such grief was ours—it seems but yesterday—
When in thy prime, wishing so much to stay,
'T was thine, Maria, thine without a sigh
At midnight in a sister's arms to die.
Oh thou wert lovely; lovely was thy frame,

⁹ In *A Short View of Tragedy*, 1692.

¹⁰ From *England's Heroical Epistles* ("Lady Jane Gray to Lord Gifford Dudley").

And pure thy spirit as from heaven it came;
 And when recalled to join the blest above
 Thou diedst a victim to exceeding love,
 Nursing the young to health. In happier hours,
 When idle Fancy wove luxuriant flowers,
 Once in thy mirth thou badst me write on thee;
 And now I write what thou shalt never see.¹¹

Sir Roger Newdigate is fairly entitled, we think, to be ranked among the great critics of this school. He made a law that none of the poems written for the prize which he established at Oxford should exceed fifty lines. This law seems to us to have at least as much foundation in reason as any of those which we have mentioned,—nay, much more, for the world, we believe, is pretty well agreed in thinking that the shorter a prize poem is the better. We do not see why we should not make a few more rules of the same kind; why we should not enact that the number of scenes in every act shall be three or some multiple of three, that the number of lines in every scene shall be an exact square, that the *dramatis personæ* shall never be more or fewer than sixteen, and that, in heroic rhymes, every thirty-sixth line shall have twelve syllables. If we were to lay down these canons, and to call Pope, Goldsmith, and Addison incorrect writers for not having complied with our whims, we should act precisely as those critics act who find incorrectness in the magnificent imagery and the varied music of Coleridge and Shelley.

The correctness which the last century prized so much resembles the correctness of those pictures of the garden of Eden which we see in old Bibles. We have an exact square, enclosed by the rivers Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel, and Euphrates, each with a convenient bridge in the center, rectangular beds of flowers, a long canal, neatly bricked and railed in; the tree of knowledge, clipped like one of the limes behind the Tuileries, standing in the center of the grand alley, the snake twined round it, the man on the right hand, the woman on the left, and the beasts drawn up in an exact circle round them. In one sense the picture is correct enough. That is to say, the squares are correct, the circles are correct; the man and the

¹¹ From Samuel Rogers's "Human Life."

woman are in a most correct line with the tree; and the snake forms a most correct spiral. But if there were a painter so gifted that he could place on the canvas that glorious paradise seen by the interior eye of him whose outward sight had failed with long watching and laboring for liberty and truth,—if there were a painter who could set before us the mazes of the sapphire brook, the lake with its fringe of myrtles, the flowery meadows, the grottoes overhung by vines, the forests shining with Hesperian fruit and with the plumage of gorgeous birds, the massy shade of that nuptial bower which showered down roses on the sleeping lovers,—what should we think of a connoisseur who should tell us that this painting, though finer than the absurd picture in the old Bible, was not so correct? Surely we should answer, It is both finer and more correct, and it is finer because it is more correct. It is not made up of correctly drawn diagrams, but it is a correct painting, a worthy representation of that which it is intended to represent.

It is not in the fine arts alone that this false correctness is prized by narrow-minded men, by men who cannot distinguish means from ends, or what is accidental from what is essential. M. Jourdain¹² admired correctness in fencing. "You had no business to hit me then. You must never thrust in quart till you have thrust in tierce." M. Tomès¹³ liked correctness in medical practice. "I stand up for Artemius. That he killed his patient is plain enough. But still he acted quite according to rule. A man dead is a man dead, and there is an end of the matter. But if rules are to be broken, there is no saying what consequences may follow." We have heard of an old German officer who was a great admirer of correctness in military operations. He used to revile Bonaparte for spoiling the science of war, which had been carried to such exquisite perfection by Marshal Daun. "In my youth we used to march and countermarch all the summer without gaining or losing a square league, and then we went into winter quarters. And now comes an ignorant, hot-headed young man, who flies about from Bologne to Ulm, and from Ulm to the middle of Moravia, and

¹² In Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

¹³ In Molière's *L'Amour Médecin*.

fights battles in December. The whole system of his tactics is monstrously incorrect." The world is of opinion, in spite of critics like these, that the end of fencing is to hit, that the end of medicine is to cure, that the end of war is to conquer, and that those means are the most correct which best accomplish the ends.

And has poetry no end, no eternal and immutable principles? Is poetry like heraldry, mere matter of arbitrary regulation? The heralds tell us that certain scutcheons and bearings denote certain conditions, and that to put colors on colors, or metals on metals, is false blazonry. If all this were reversed, if every coat of arms in Europe were new fashioned, if it were decreed that or should never be placed but on argent, or argent but on or, that illegitimacy should be denoted by a lozenge, and widowhood by a bend, the new science would be just as good as the old science, because both the new and the old would be good for nothing. The mummery of Portecullis and Rouge Dragon,¹⁴ as it has no other value than that which caprice has assigned to it, may well submit to any laws which caprice may impose upon it. But it is not so with that great imitative art, to the power of which all ages, the rudest and the most enlightened, bear witness. Since its first great masterpieces were produced, everything that is changeable in this world has been changed. Civilization has been gained, lost, gained again. Religions, and languages, and forms of government, and usages of private life, and modes of thinking, all have undergone a succession of revolutions. Everything has passed away but the great features of nature and the heart of man, and the miracles of that art of which it is the office to reflect back the heart of man and the features of nature. Those two strange old poems, the wonder of ninety generations, still retain all their freshness. They still command the veneration of minds enriched by the literature of many nations and ages. They are still, even in wretched translations, the delight of schoolboys. Having survived ten thousand capricious fashions, having seen successive codes of criticism become obsolete, they still remain to us, immortal with the immortality of truth, the

¹⁴ Officers of the English College of Heralds.

same when perused in the study of an English scholar as when they were first chanted at the banquets of the Ionian princes.

Poetry is, as was said more than two thousand years ago, imitation. It is an art analogous in many respects to the art of painting, sculpture, and acting. The imitations of the painter, the sculptor, and the actor, are indeed, within certain limits, more perfect than those of the poet. The machinery which the poet employs consists merely of words; and words cannot, even when employed by such an artist as Homer or Dante, present to the mind images of visible objects quite so lively and exact as those which we carry away from looking on the works of the brush and the chisel. But on the other hand, the range of poetry is infinitely wider than that of any other imitative art, or than that of all the other imitative arts together. The sculptor can imitate only form; the painter only form and color; the actor—until the poet supplies him with words—only form, color, and motion. Poetry holds the outer world in common with the other arts; the heart of man is the province of poetry and of poetry alone. The painter, the sculptor, and the actor can exhibit no more of human passion and character than that small portion which overflows into the gesture and the face, always an imperfect, often a deceitful, sign of that which is within. The deeper and more complex parts of human nature can be exhibited by means of words alone. Thus the objects of the imitation of poetry are the whole external and the whole internal universe, the face of nature, the vicissitudes of fortune, man as he is in himself, man as he appears in society, all things which really exist, all things of which we can form an image in our minds by combining together parts of things which really exist. The domain of this imperial art is commensurate with the imaginative faculty.

An art essentially imitative ought not, surely, to be subjected to rules which tend to make its imitations less perfect than they otherwise would be; and those who obey such rules ought to be called, not correct, but incorrect artists. The true way to judge of the rules by which English poetry was governed during the last century is to look at the effects which they produced.

It was in 1780 that Johnson completed his *Lives of the Poets*. He tells us in that work that since the time of Dryden English poetry had shown no tendency to relapse into its original savageness, that its language had been refined, its numbers tuned, and its sentiments improved. It may perhaps be doubted whether the nation had any great reason to exult in the refinements and improvements which gave it *Douglas*¹⁵ for *Othello*, and *The Triumphs of Temper*¹⁶ for *The Fairy Queen*. It was during the thirty years which preceded the appearance of Johnson's *Lives* that the diction and versification of English poetry were, in the sense in which the word is commonly used, most correct. Those thirty years are, as respects poetry, the most deplorable part of our literary history. They have indeed bequeathed to us scarcely any poetry which deserves to be remembered. Two or three hundred lines of Gray, twice as many of Goldsmith, a few stanzas of Beattie and Collins, a few strophes of Mason, and a few clever prologues and satires, were the masterpieces of this age of consummate excellence. They may all be printed in one volume, and that volume would be by no means a volume of extraordinary merit. It would contain no poetry of the very highest class, and little which could be placed very high in the second class. The *Paradise Regained* or *Comus* would outweigh it all.

At last, when poetry had fallen into such utter decay that Mr. Hayley was thought a great poet, it began to appear that the excess of the evil was about to work the cure. Men became tired of an insipid conformity to a standard which derived no authority from nature or reason. A shallow criticism had taught them to ascribe a superstitious value to the spurious correctness of poetasters. A deeper criticism brought them back to the true correctness of the first great masters. The eternal laws of poetry regained their power, and the temporary fashions which had superseded those laws went after the wig of Lovelace and the hoop of Clarissa.

¹⁵ A tragedy by John Home, 1756.

¹⁶ A poem by William Hayley, 1781.

THE COMEDY OF THE RESTORATION

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

[This is a portion of Macaulay's review of Leigh Hunt's edition of the Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, etc., which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for July, 1841. In part it is a reply to Lamb's plea for the comedy of the Restoration (see pages 193-97).]

We have said that we think the present publication perfectly justifiable. But we can by no means agree with Mr. Leigh Hunt, who seems to hold that there is little or no ground for the charge of immorality so often brought against the literature of the Restoration. We do not blame him for not bringing to the judgment-seat the merciless rigor of Lord Angelo,¹ but we really think that such flagitious and impudent offenders as those who are now at the bar deserved at least the gentle rebuke of Escalus. Mr. Leigh Hunt treats the whole matter a little too much in the easy style of Lucio; and perhaps his exceeding lenity disposes us to be somewhat too severe.

And yet it is not easy to be too severe. For in truth this part of our literature is a disgrace to our language and our national character. It is clever, indeed, and very entertaining; but it is, in the most emphatic sense of the words, "earthly, sensual, devilish." Its indecency, though perpetually such as is condemned not less by the rules of good taste than by those of morality, is not, in our opinion, so disgraceful a fault as its singularly inhuman spirit. We have here Belial, not as when he inspired Ovid and Ariosto, "graceful and humane," but with the iron eye and cruel sneer of Mephistopheles. We find ourselves in a world in which the ladies are like very profligate, impudent, and unfeeling men, and in which the men are too bad for any place but Pandemonium or Norfolk Island.² We are surrounded by foreheads of bronze, hearts like the nether millstone, and tongues set on fire of hell.

¹ In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; so also Escalus and Lucio.

² A penal colony east of Australia.

Dryden defended or excused his own offences and those of his contemporaries by pleading the example of the earlier English dramatists, and Mr. Leigh Hunt seems to think that there is force in the plea. We altogether differ from his opinion. The crime charged is not mere coarseness of expression. The terms which are delicate in one age become gross in the next. The diction of the English version of the Pentateuch is sometimes such as Addison would not have ventured to imitate; and Addison, the standard of moral purity in his own age, used many phrases which are now proscribed. Whether a thing shall be designated by a plain noun substantive or by a circumlocution is mere matter of fashion. Morality is not at all interested in the question. But morality is deeply interested in this, that what is immoral shall not be presented to the imagination of the young and susceptible in constant connection with what is attractive. For every person who has observed the operation of the law of association in his own mind and in the minds of others knows that whatever is constantly presented to the imagination in connection with what is attractive will itself become attractive. There is undoubtedly a great deal of indelicate writing in Fletcher and Massinger, and more than might be wished even in Ben Jonson and Shakespeare, who are comparatively pure. But it is impossible to trace in their plays any systematic attempt to associate vice with those things which men value most and desire most, and virtue with everything ridiculous and degrading. And such a systematic attempt we do find in the whole dramatic literature which followed the return of Charles the Second. We will take, as an instance of what we mean, a single subject of the highest importance to the happiness of mankind,—conjugal fidelity. We can at present hardly call to mind a single English play written before the Civil War in which the character of a seducer of married women is represented in a favorable light. We remember many plays in which such persons are baffled, exposed, covered with derision, and insulted by triumphant husbands. Such is the fate of Falstaff, with all his wit and knowledge of the world. Such is the fate of Brisac in Fletcher's *Elder Brother*, and of Ricardo and Ubaldo in Massinger's *Picture*. Sometimes, as in *The*

*Fatal Dowry*³ and *Love's Cruelty*,⁴ the outraged honor of families is repaired by a bloody revenge. If now and then the lover is represented as an accomplished man, and the husband as a person of weak or odious character, this only makes the triumph of female virtue the more signal, as in Jonson's *Celia* and *Mrs. Fitzdottrel*,⁵ and in Fletcher's *Maria*.⁶ In general we will venture to say that the dramatists of the age of Elizabeth and James the First either treat the breach of the marriage vow as a serious crime, or, if they treat it as a matter for laughter, turn the laugh against the gallant.

On the contrary, during the forty years which followed the Restoration, the whole body of the dramatists invariably represent adultery, we do not say as a peccadillo, we do not say as an error which the violence of passion may excuse, but as the calling of a fine gentleman, as a grace without which his character would be imperfect. It is as essential to his breeding and to his place in society that he should make love to the wives of his neighbors as that he should know French or that he should have a sword at his side. In all this there is no passion, and scarcely anything that can be called preference. The hero intrigues just as he wears a wig, because if he did not he would be a queer fellow, a city prig,—perhaps a Puritan. All the agreeable qualities are always given to the gallant. All the contempt and aversion are the portion of the unfortunate husband. Take Dryden, for example; and compare Woodall with Brainsick, or Lorenzo with Gomez.⁷ Take Wycherley; and compare Horner with Pinchwife.⁸ Take Vanbrugh; and compare Constant with Sir John Brute.⁹ Take Farquhar; and compare Archer with Squire Sullen.¹⁰ Take Congreve; and compare Bellmour with Fondlewife, Careless with Sir Paul Plyant, or Scandal with Foresight.¹¹ In all these cases, and in many more which might be named, the dramatist does

³ By Massinger and Field.

⁴ By Shirley.

⁵ *Celia* in *Volpone*; *Mrs. Fitzdottrel* in *The Devil is an Ass*.

⁶ In *The Tamer Tamed*.

⁷ In *Limberham* and *The Spanish Friar*.

⁸ In *The Country Wife*.

⁹ In *The Provoked Wife*.

¹⁰ In *The Beau's Stratagem*.

¹¹ In *The Old Bachelor*, *The Double Dealer*, and *Love for Love*.

his best to make the person who commits the injury graceful, sensible, and spirited, and the person who suffers it a fool, or a tyrant, or both.

Mr. Charles Lamb, indeed, attempted to set up a defence for this way of writing. The dramatists of the latter part of the seventeenth century are not, according to him, to be tried by the standard of morality which exists, and ought to exist, in real life. Their world is a conventional world. Their heroes and heroines belong, not to England, not to Christendom, but to an Utopia of gallantry, to a fairy land, where the Bible and Burn's *Justice*¹² are unknown, where a prank which on this earth would be rewarded with the pillory is merely matter for a peal of elvish laughter. A real Horner, a real Careless, would, it is admitted, be exceedingly bad men. But to predicate morality or immorality of the Horner of Wycherley and the Careless of Congreve is as absurd as it would be to arraign a sleeper for his dreams. "They belong to the regions of pure comedy, where no cold moral reigns. When we are among them we are among a chaotic people. We are not to judge them by our usages. No reverend institutions are insulted by their proceedings, for they have none among them. No peace of families is violated, for no family ties exist among them. There is neither right nor wrong, gratitude or its opposite, claim or duty, paternity or sonship."¹³

This is, we believe, a fair summary of Mr. Lamb's doctrine. We are sure that we do not wish to represent him unfairly. For we admire his genius; we love the kind nature which appears in all his writings; and we cherish his memory almost as much as if we had known him personally. But we must plainly say that his argument, though ingenious, is altogether sophistical.

Of course we perfectly understand that it is possible for a writer to create a conventional world in which things forbidden by the Decalogue and the Statute Book shall be lawful, and yet that the exhibition may be harmless, or even edifying. For example, we suppose that the most austere critics would not accuse Fénelon of impiety and immorality on account of his *Telemachus*

¹² An 18th century manual for justices of the peace.

¹³ See p. 196.

and his *Dialogues of the Dead*. In *Telemachus* and the *Dialogues of the Dead* we have a false religion, and consequently a morality which is in some point incorrect. We have a right and a wrong differing from the right and the wrong of real life. It is represented as the first duty of men to pay honor to Jove and Minerva. Philocles, who employs his leisure in making graven images of these deities, is extolled for his piety in a way which contrasts singularly with the expressions of Isaiah on the same subject. The dead are judged by Minos, and rewarded with lasting happiness for actions which Fénelon would have been the first to pronounce splendid sins. The same may be said of Mr. Southey's Mahomedan and Hindoo heroes and heroines. In *Thalaba*, to speak in derogation of the Arabian impostor is blasphemy: to drink wine is a crime: to perform ablutions and to pay honor to the holy cities are works of merit. In *The Curse of Kehama*, Kailyal is commended for her devotion to the statue of Mariataly, the goddess of the poor. But certainly no person will accuse Mr. Southey of having promoted or intended to promote either Islamism or Brahminism.

It is easy to see why the conventional worlds of Fénelon and Mr. Southey are unobjectionable. In the first place, they are utterly unlike the real world in which we live. The state of society, the laws even of the physical world, are so different from those with which we are familiar, that we cannot be shocked at finding the morality also very different. But in truth the morality of these conventional worlds differs from the morality of the real world only in points where there is no danger that the real world will ever go wrong. The generosity and docility of Telemachus, the fortitude, the modesty, the filial tenderness of Kailyal, are virtues of all ages and nations. And there was very little danger that the Dauphin would worship Minerva, or that an English damsel would dance, with a bucket on her head, before the statue of Mariataly. The case is widely different with what Mr. Charles Lamb calls the conventional world of Wycherley and Congreve. Here the garb, the manners, the topics of conversation are those of the real town and of the passing day. The hero is in all superficial accomplishments exactly the

fine gentleman whom every youth in the pit would gladly resemble. The heroine is the fine lady whom every youth in the pit would gladly marry. The scene is laid in some place which is as well known to the audience as their own houses,—in St. James's Park, or Hyde Park, or Westminster Hall. The lawyer bustles about with his bag, between the Common Pleas and the Exchequer. The Peer calls for his carriage to go to the House of Lords on a private bill. A hundred little touches are employed to make the fictitious world appear like the actual world. And the immorality is of a sort which never can be out of date, and which all the force of religion, law, and public opinion united can but imperfectly restrain.

In the name of art, as well as in the name of virtue, we protest against the principle that the world of pure comedy is one into which no moral enters. If comedy be an imitation, under whatever conventions, of real life, how is it possible that it can have no reference to the great rule which directs life, and to feelings which are called forth by every incident of life? If what Mr. Charles Lamb says were correct, the inference would be that these dramatists did not in the least understand the first principles of their craft. Pure landscape painting into which no light or shade enters, pure portrait painting into which no expression enters, are phrases less at variance with sound criticism than pure comedy into which no moral enters.

But it is not the fact that the world of these dramatists is a world into which no moral enters. Morality constantly enters into that world,—a sound morality, and an unsound morality; the sound morality to be insulted, derided, associated with everything mean and hateful, the unsound morality to be set off to every advantage, and inculcated by all methods, direct and indirect. It is not the fact that none of the inhabitants of this conventional world feel reverence for sacred institutions and family ties. Fondlewife, Pinchwife, every person, in short, of narrow understanding and disgusting manners, expresses that reverence strongly. The heroes and heroines, too, have a moral code of their own,—an exceedingly bad one, but not, as Mr. Charles Lamb seems to think, a code

existing only in the imagination of dramatists. It is, on the contrary, a code actually received and obeyed by great numbers of people. We need not go to Utopia or Fairyland to find them. They are near at hand. Every night some of them cheat at the hells in the Quadrant, and others pace the Piazza in Covent Garden. Without flying to Nephelococcygia¹⁴ or to the court of Queen Mab, we can meet with sharpers, hard-hearted bullies, impudent debauchees, and women worthy of such paramours. The morality of *The Country Wife* and *The Old Bachelor* is the morality, not, as Mr. Charles Lamb maintains, of an unreal world, but of a world which is a great deal too real. It is the morality, not of a chaotic people, but of low town-rakes and of those ladies whom the newspapers call "dashing Cyprians." And the question is simply this: whether a man of genius who constantly and systematically endeavors to make this sort of character attractive, by uniting it with beauty, grace, dignity, spirit, a high social position, popularity, literature, wit, taste, knowledge of the world, brilliant success in every undertaking, does or does not make an ill use of his powers. We own that we are unable to understand how this question can be answered in any way but one.

CARICATURE AND REALISM

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

[A portion of Macaulay's review of the *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*; it appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for January, 1843.]

There is, in one respect, a remarkable analogy between the faces and the minds of men. No two faces are alike; and yet very few faces deviate very widely from the common standard. Among the eighteen hundred thousand human beings who inhabit London, there is not one who could be taken by his acquaintance for another; yet we may walk from Paddington to Mile End without seeing

¹⁴ "Cuckootown in the Clouds," a city in *The Birds* of Aristophanes.

one person in whom any feature is so overcharged that we turn round to stare at it. An infinite number of varieties lies between limits which are not very far asunder. The specimens which pass those limits on either side form a very small minority.

It is the same with the characters of men. Here, too, the variety passes all enumeration. But the cases in which the deviation from the common standard is striking and grotesque are very few. In one mind avarice predominates; in another, pride; in a third, love of pleasure; just as in one countenance the nose is the most marked feature, while in others the chief expression lies in the brow, or in the lines of the mouth. But there are very few countenances in which nose, brow, and mouth do not contribute, though in unequal degrees, to the general effect; and so there are very few characters in which one overgrown propensity makes all others utterly insignificant.

It is evident that a portrait-painter, who was able only to represent faces and figures such as those which we pay money to see at fairs, would not, however spirited his execution might be, take rank among the highest artists. He must always be placed below those who have skill to seize the peculiarities which do not amount to deformity. The slighter those peculiarities, the greater is the merit of the limner who can catch them and transfer them to his canvas. To paint Daniel Lambert¹ or the living skeleton, the pig-faced lady or the Siamese twins, so that nobody can mistake them, is an exploit within the reach of a sign-painter. A third-rate artist might give us the squint of Wilkes, and the depressed nose and protuberant cheeks of Gibbon. It would require a much higher degree of skill to paint two such men as Mr. Canning and Sir Thomas Lawrence, so that nobody who had ever seen them could for a moment hesitate to assign each picture to its original. Here the mere caricaturist would be quite at fault. He would find in neither face anything on which he could lay hold for the purpose of making a distinction. Two ample bald foreheads, two regular profiles, two full faces of the same oval form, would baffle

¹ Celebrated for his corpulency; died 1809.

his art; and he would be reduced to the miserable shift of writing their names at the foot of his picture. Yet there was a great difference; and a person who had seen them would no more have mistaken one of them for the other, than he would have mistaken Mr. Pitt for Mr. Fox. But the difference lay in delicate lineaments and shades, reserved for pencils of a rare order.

This distinction runs through all the imitative arts. Foote's² mimicry was exquisitely ludicrous, but it was all caricature. He could take off only some strange peculiarity, a stammer or a lisp, a Northumbrian burr or an Irish brogue, a stoop or a shuffle. "If a man," said Johnson, "hops on one leg, Foote can hop on one leg." Garrick, on the other hand, could seize those differences of manner and pronunciation which, though highly characteristic, are yet too slight to be described. Foote, we have no doubt, could have made the Haymarket Theater shake with laughter by imitating a conversation between a Scotchman and a Somersetshireman. But Garrick could have imitated a conversation between two fashionable men, both models of the best breeding,—Lord Chesterfield, for example, and Lord Albemarle,—so that no person could doubt which was which, although no person could say that, in any point, either Lord Chesterfield or Lord Albemarle spoke or moved otherwise than in conformity with the usages of the best society.

The same distinction is found in the drama and in fictitious narrative. Highest among those who have exhibited human nature by means of dialogue, stands Shakespeare. His variety is like the variety of nature,—endless diversity, scarcely any monstrosity. The characters of which he has given us an impression, as vivid as that which we received from the characters of our own associates, are to be reckoned by scores. Yet in all these scores hardly one character is to be found which deviates widely from the common standard, and which we should call very eccentric if we met it in real life. The silly notion that every man has one ruling passion, and that this clue, once known, unravels all the mysteries of his conduct, finds no countenance in the plays of Shakes-

² Samuel Foote, a comedian (1720-1777).

peare. There man appears as he is, made up of a crowd of passions, which contend for the mastery over him and govern him in turn. What is Hamlet's ruling passion? Or Othello's? Or Harry the Fifth's? Or Wolsey's? Or Lear's? Or Shylock's? Or Benedick's? Or Macbeth's? Or that of Cassius? Or that of Falconbridge? But we might go on for ever. Take a single example, Shylock. Is he so eager for money as to be indifferent to revenge? Or so eager for revenge as to be indifferent to money? Or so bent on both together as to be indifferent to the honor of his nation and the law of Moses? All his propensities are mingled with each other, so that, in trying to apportion to each its proper part, we find the same difficulty which constantly meets us in real life. A superficial critic may say that hatred is Shylock's ruling passion. But how many passions have amalgamated to form that hatred? It is partly the result of wounded pride: Antonio has called him dog. It is partly the result of covetousness: Antonio has hindered him of half a million; and, when Antonio is gone, there will be no limit to the gains of usury. It is partly the result of national and religious feeling: Antonio has spit on the Jewish gaberdine, and the oath of revenge has been sworn by the Jewish Sabbath. We might go through all the characters which we have mentioned, and through fifty more in the same way; for it is the constant manner of Shakespeare to represent the human mind as lying, not under the absolute dominion of one despotic propensity, but under a mixed government, in which a hundred powers balance each other. Admirable as he was in all parts of his art, we most admire him for this, that while he has left us a greater number of striking portraits than all other dramatists put together, he has scarcely left us a single caricature.

Shakespeare has had neither equal nor second. But, among the writers who, in the point which we have noticed, have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud. She has given us a multitude of characters, all, in a certain sense, commonplace, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other

as if they were the most eccentric of human beings. There are, for instance, four clergymen, none of whom we should be surprised to find in any parsonage in the kingdom,—Mr. Edward Ferrars, Mr. Henry Tilney, Mr. Edmund Bertram, and Mr. Elton.³ They are all specimens of the upper part of the middle class. They have all been liberally educated. They all lie under the restraints of the same sacred profession. They are all young. They are all in love. Not one of them has any hobbyhorse, to use the phrase of Sterne. Not one has a ruling passion, such as we read of in Pope. Who would not have expected them to be insipid likenesses of each other? No such thing. Harpagon is not more unlike to Jourdain,⁴ Joseph Surface is not more unlike to Sir Lucius O'Trigger,⁵ than every one of Miss Austen's young divines to all his reverend brethren. And almost all this is done by touches so delicate that they elude analysis, that they defy the powers of description, and that we know them to exist only by the general effect to which they have contributed.

A line must be drawn, we conceive, between artists of this class and those poets and novelists whose skill lies in the exhibiting of what Ben Jonson called humors. The words of Ben are so much to the purpose that we will quote them:

When some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluxions all to run one way,
This may be truly said to be a humour.⁶

There are undoubtedly persons in whom humors such as Ben describes have attained a complete ascendancy. The avarice of Elwes, the insane desire of Sir Egerton Brydges for a barony to which he had no more right than to the crown of Spain, the malevolence which long meditation on imaginary wrongs generated in the gloomy

³ In *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*, respectively.

⁴ In Molière's *L'Avare* and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

⁵ In Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*.

⁶ *Every Man out of his Humour*, Induction.

mind of Bellingham, are instances. The feeling which animated Clarkson and other virtuous men against the slave trade and slavery is an instance of a more honorable kind.

Seeing that such humors exist, we cannot deny that they are proper subjects for the imitations of art. But we conceive that the imitation of such humors, however skilful and amusing, is not an achievement of the highest order; and, as such humors are rare in real life, they ought, we conceive, to be sparingly introduced into works which profess to be pictures of real life. Nevertheless, a writer may show so much genius in the exhibition of these humors as to be fairly entitled to a distinguished and permanent rank among classics. The chief seats of all, however, the places on the dais and under the canopy, are reserved for the few who have excelled in the difficult art of portraying characters in which no single feature is extravagantly overcharged.

If we have expounded the law soundly, we can have no difficulty in applying it to the particular case before us. Madame d'Arblay has left us scarcely anything but humors. Almost every one of her men and women has some one propensity developed to a morbid degree. In *Cecilia*, for example, Mr. Delvile never opens his lips without some allusion to his own birth and station; or Mr. Briggs, without some allusion to the hoarding of money; or Mr. Hobson, without betraying the self-indulgence and self-importance of a purse-proud upstart; or Mr. Simkins, without uttering some sneaking remark for the purpose of currying favor with his customers; or Mr. Meadows, without expressing apathy and weariness of life; or Mr. Albany, without declaiming about the vices of the rich and the misery of the poor; or Mrs. Belfield, without some indelicate eulogy on her son; or Lady Margaret, without indicating jealousy of her husband. Morrice is all skipping, officious impertinence, Mr. Gosport all sarcasm, Lady Honoria all lively prattle, Miss Larolles all silly prattle. If ever Madame d'Arblay aimed at more, we do not think that she succeeded well.

We are, therefore, forced to refuse to Madame d'Arblay a place in the highest rank of art; but we cannot deny that, in the rank to which she belonged, she had few equals.

and scarcely any superior. The variety of humors which is to be found in her novels is immense; and though the talk of each person separately is monotonous, the general effect is not monotony, but a very lively and agreeable diversity. Her plots are rudely constructed and improbable, if we consider them in themselves. But they are admirably framed for the purpose of exhibiting striking groups of eccentric characters, each governed by his own peculiar whim, each talking his own peculiar jargon, and each bringing out by opposing the oddities of all the rest. We will give one example out of many which occur to us. All probability is violated in order to bring Mr. Delvile, Mr. Briggs, Mr. Hobson, and Mr. Albany into a room together. But when we have them there, we soon forget probability in the exquisitely ludicrous effect which is produced by the conflict of four old fools, each raging with a monomania of his own, each talking a dialect of his own, and each inflaming all the others anew every time he opens his mouth.

SPENSER AND HIS CRITICS

JOHN WILSON

[This selection is an abbreviation of one of a series of garrulous appreciative papers on Spenser which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*,—the present one in September, 1834,—under Wilson's pen-name of "Christopher North." The opening sentences refer to Thomas Warton's work called *Observations on the Fairy Queen*, published 1754.]

All honor to the memory of Tom Warton!—all honor and all love. He was a poet as well as an antiquary, and understood Spenser far better than he thought; and had he not had the fear of Aristotle before his eyes, and an awe in his soul, not too profound—for that was impossible—but habitual rather than reflective, for the Greek and the Roman genius—the *Classics*—he would have left unsaid many questionable, many important, and many untrue sayings (yet has he said many that are most true) about the *Faerie Queene*. He was in his day, and is now, one of the brightest ornaments, the greatest

glories, of Oxford, of her whom Lord Brougham (not in the *Edinburgh Review*) rightly calls that "old, renowned, and famous university." He wonders to find Ariosto, many years after the Revival of Letters, "rejecting truth for magic, and preferring the ridiculous and incoherent excursions of Boiardo to the propriety and uniformity of the Grecian and Roman models." Propriety and uniformity! You must take the terms in an enlarged sense indeed, before you can justly apply them to the adventures of Ulysses. And was not Medea an enchantress, as well as Calypso and Circe? Beni, he says, one of the most celebrated critics of the sixteenth century, was still so infatuated with a fondness for the old Provençal vein that he ventured to write a regular dissertation in which he compares Ariosto and Homer. And why not? There are in the Ariosto of the South and in the Ariosto of the North—you know whom Byron so designated¹—as fine things as in Homer. They are Homeric. Warton speaks contemptuously of the unnatural events of the romantic school of Provençal bards,—the machinations of imaginary beings and adventures, entertaining only as they were improbable,—and wonders why, when the works of Homer and Aristotle were restored and studied in Italy, and every species of literature at last emerged from the depths of Gothic ignorance and barbarity, poets followed not the example and precept of antiquity, in justness of thought and design, and the decorum of nature. The answer is plain and pleasant—because original genius is not imitative of models, however admirable, and, inspired by what is old, invents what is new—"alike, but oh, how different!" . . . Ariosto, with all his extravagances—sad to say—was preferred by the Italians to Tasso, who "composed his poem in some measure on a regular plan." The genius of both was, is, and ever will be justly, and raptly, admired by all civilized men; for there is truth in magic; strangest and wildest events are natural, or may be made to seem so,—which is all the same; the machinations of imaginary beings rule all the characters and events in the *Iliad*, even more than in the *Odyssey*,—adventures, not only improbable but repugnant to reason,

¹ Scott (in *Childe Harold*, canto iv, stanza 40).

become sworn articles in the creed of Fancy's faith; and the "decorum which nature dictates" Nature herself rejoices to give to the winds. Genius, being familiar with what Warton, inconsistently with his own fine fancy, calls the illegitimate and romantic manner of composition introduced and exhibited by the Provençal bards, kindled into higher and stronger flame at the inspiring touch of the old Greek fire that had smouldered for so many ages beneath the ruins Time had made, and again burst forth into day from the dust. But Tasso and Ariosto, favorites of Nature and confident in her love, too deeply felt their power to deign to follow afar off; and all followers, however near they may think themselves, or may be thought, lag behind the guiding stars,—and yet, remote as they are, are eclipsed by the very luminaries from which in vain they seek to draw their light.

Such was the prevailing taste, continues Warton, when Spenser projected his *Faerie Queene*, "a poem which, according to the practice of Ariosto, was to consist of allegories, enchantments, and romantic expeditions, conducted by knights, giants, magicians, and fictitious beings. *It may be urged that Spenser made an unfortunate choice, and discovered but little judgment!*" Anything may be urged, and the more foolish the better; it may be urged that Milton made an unfortunate choice, and discovered but little judgment, in *Paradise Lost*,—and that Shakespeare was culpable beyond pardon in having imagined *Lear*; for there is nothing like that epic, or that tragedy, in Homer or Æschylus. As for the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'tis mere lunacy; and Macbeth is a madman, though kept in countenance by *Hercules Furens*.² Yet the critic who maunders thus oftener writes in the spirit of a true creed, and even at the close of this very paragraph says truly that Spenser, with whom Ariosto was a favorite, was naturally led "to prefer that plan which would admit the most extensive range for his unlimited imagination." In other words, his unlimited imagination looked over the whole field of human life, and saw all the powers and passions of humanity there passing

² By Euripides.

to and fro; and, impersonating them all, made them all visible, giving them duties to perform, and triumphs to achieve, and defeats to sustain,—and furnishing a purgatory for the erring, a hell for the guilty, and a heaven for the good, entrancing and astounding all generations by the ineffable beauty of the Bower of Bliss, and the inutterable dismalness of the Cave of Despair!

Warton is himself again—though not always—in his chapter on “Spenser’s Allegorical Character.” Hume says “that Homer copied true natural manners, which, however rough and uncultivated, will always form an agreeable and interesting picture, but the pencil of the English poet [Spenser] was employed in drawing the affectations and conceits and fopperies of chivalry.”³ That is sad stuff. Was Achilles rough and uncultivated? And lived there ever on this earth such a being? No—never. But, not to dwell on that, there were chivalrous ages, just as there were heroic ages; and if they had their affectations and conceits and fopperies, you will seek in vain for them in the *Faerie Queene*. . . .

Almost all Spenser’s critics, however encomiastic, have strenuously exerted their wits, great or small, to find out defects and faults in his allegories, and in the general conduct of the poem. Sir William Temple must have been hard put to it when he said that, though Spenser’s flights of song were very noble and high, yet his moral lay so bare that it lost the effect.⁴ According to this authority, your moral should lie cunningly concealed, that it may rise unexpectedly out of the murk, like a ghost in its grave-clothes, and, after a solemn but not very intelligible warning, melt away into the nearest stanza. Hughes, in his sensible *Essay on Allegorical Poetry*,⁵ thinks that a moral which is not clear is next to no moral at all, and complains bitterly on the darkness of many of the ancient fables. Even Lord Bacon, in his *Wisdom of the Ancients*, has often failed in deciphering the best known traditions in the heathen mythology,—many of which, it is not to be doubted, were allegorical; but an allegory, says Hughes, somewhat nettled, “which

³ See the *History of England*, end of “Appendix III.”

⁴ In his essay “Of Poetry.”

⁵ Published in his edition of Spenser, 1715.

is not clear is a riddle"; and conscious, perhaps, that he was himself no *Edipus*, he is intolerant of *Sphinx*. He mentions some properties which seem requisite in all well-invented fables of this kind, and then perpend, in a wiseacreish pause, to consider if they are all to be found always in the *Faerie Queene*. One is, that the fable shall everywhere be consistent with itself; and the sage, seeming to shake his head, finally declares that "most of the allegories in the *Faerie Queene* are agreeable to this rule; but in one of his other poems the author has manifestly transgressed it,—the poem I mean is that which is called 'Prothalamion.' In this the two brides are figured by two beautiful swans, sailing down the river Thames. The allegory breaks before the reader is prepared for it; and we see them, at their landing, in their true shapes, without knowing how this sudden change is effected." It requires small shrewdness to know how the sudden change was effected: Spenser merely lifted up his forefinger—and the swans became virgins, and the virgins brides; nay, he had not even to lift up his little finger, for the "beauty still more beauteous" had kept for so long a time brightening before his eyes that the fairest swans that ever floated in watery light grew of themselves, without any conscious magic on his part, into the fairest of England's daughters; and then—

Above the rest were goodly to be seene
Two gentle knights of lovely face and feature,
Beseeming well the bower of any queene,
With gifts of wit and ornaments of nature,
Fit for so goodly stature,
That like the twins of Jove they seemed in sight
Which deck the baldrick of the heavens bright;
They too, forth pacing to the river's side,
Received those two fair brides, their loves' delight.

O, ghost of Mr. Hughes! as you love us for speaking handsomely of that gentleman in this magazine, revoke his sentence of condemnation on this close of the "Prothalamion," and puzzle not your own worthy self in Hades with vainly attempting to see into the mystery of that transfiguration; for pardon us for saying that the wisest specter may study all death long, without catching so

much as a faint glimmer of the spirit of the Laws of Dreams. . . .

While [Spence] ⁶ allows that Spenser's "invention is one of the most beautiful that perhaps ever was," he is "sorry to say that he does not only fall short of that simplicity and propriety which is so remarkable in the works of the ancients, but runs now and then into thoughts that are quite unworthy of so great a genius." He is even afraid to mention them, for they look quite gross taken by themselves; but, conquering fear and repugnance, he refers to "the great deal of apparatus in Spenser's manner of introducing Pride"—drawn in a chariot by six different creatures, Satan being the charioteer: Idleness on an ass, Gluttony on a hog, Lechery on a goat, Avarice on a camel laden with gold, Envy eating a toad and riding on a wolf, and Wrath, with a firebrand in his hand, riding on a lion. Satan's equipage is beyond the comprehension of Spence, and he cannot credit his own eyes as he sees old Coachee dashing by, six-in-hand, without troubling himself to pay the turnpikes. "The chief fault I find with it is that it is too complex a way of characterizing pride in general, and may possibly be as improper in some few respects as it is redundant in others." The description, too, of the dragon killed by the Knight of the Red Cross, in the last canto of the First Book, puzzles Polymetis. The tail of this dragon, he exclaims (holding up his hands with pen behind his ear), "wanted very little of being three furlongs in length; the blood that gushes from his wound is enough to drive a water-mill, and his roar is like that of a hundred hungry lions." What a prodigious monster! Yet he might have remembered how a serpent once arrested the progress of a Roman army,—that Milton represents Satan (who was not only *a* but *the* Great Dragon) as "floating many a rood"; while in justification of Spenser we should have simply pointed to the Ram of Derby,⁷ or referred Mr. Spence to Squire More of Moreshall.⁸ . . . The faults of Spenser's

⁶ Joseph Spence, author of *Polymetis* (1747), a work on classical mythology in art and literature. Hence Wilson dubs him "Polymetis" some lines further on.

⁷ A ram of miraculous dimensions, etc., celebrated in old Derbyshire ballads.

⁸ The hero of the ballad of "The Dragon of Wantley," found in Percy's *Reliques*.

allegories—"under the third general head"—are arranged by this precise and pompous pedant into six classes. We should murder the man whom we could prove to have arranged under the "third general head" of the faults of Christopher North, six classes of faults. All men are at liberty to call them "in numbers without number numberless," but no man shall with impunity arrange them into six classes under the third general head. Curse classification of one's crimes! In the slump they leave you still human;—divided, and subdivided, and then multiplied, not the likeness of a dog. So fares Spenser the poet with Spence the arithmetician; so would fare William Shakespeare with Joseph Hume.⁹ He jots down as belonging to class second—general head third—"his affixing such filthy ideas to some of his personages that it half turns one's stomach to read his account of them. Such, for example, is the description of Error."¹⁰ And what would have been the harm had it wholly turned Spence's stomach? To a man of sedentary habits nothing so salutary as an emetic. But men's stomachs are too often as strong as their hearts are hard, and to many Error looks lovely still, in spite of all the loathliest foulness in which the sage Spenser has steeped her. . . .

Dryden, himself a mighty master of versification, preferred—at least he says so, but we hope he lied—Waller's to Spenser's!¹¹ We must speak leniently, then, of the follies of meaner men. Hughes saith, "As to the stanza in which the *Faerie Queene* is written, *though the author cannot be commended for his choice of it*, yet it is much more harmonious in its kind than the heroic verse of that age; it is almost the same with that the Italians call their *ottava rima*, which is used both by Ariosto and Tasso, but improved by Spenser, with the addition of a line more in the close, of the length of our alexandrines." Mr. Hughes cannot commend Spenser for his choice—

⁹ A radical Member of Parliament interested in economic reform.

¹⁰ See *Faerie Queene*, Bk. i, canto i, stanza 20.

¹¹ In the *Discourse on Satire*: "[Spenser's] obsolete language, and the ill choice of his stanza, are faults but of the second magnitude; . . . and he is the more to be admired, that, labouring under such a difficulty, his verses are so numerous, so various, and so harmonious, that only Virgil, whom he profestly imitated, has surpassed him among the Romans, and only Mr. Waller among the English."

that is, invention—of his stanza, nor perhaps would he have been able to commend Haydn for the style of music he chose in his *Creation*. It is not almost the same with that the Italians call their *ottava rima*, and if Hughes had been a horse he would have known—in case of lameness—that three legs are not almost the same as four. But Tom Warton, a poet, follows Hughes in this blindness and deafness, absolutely saying, “Although Spenser’s favorite Chaucer made use of the *ottava rima*” (which he did not), “or stanza of eight lines, yet it seems probable that Spenser was principally induced to adopt it, with the addition of one line, from the practice of Ariosto and Tasso, the most fashionable poets of his age. But Spenser, in choosing this stanza, did not sufficiently consider the genius of the English language, which does not easily fall into a frequent repetition of the same termination, a circumstance natural to the Italian, which deals largely in identical cadences.” Tom Warton knew, notwithstanding all this nonsense, that no two kinds of stanza extant are more different than Spenser’s and the *ottava rima* of the Italians. He has himself told us so. “Their *ottava rima* has only three similar endings alternately rhyming—the two last lines formed a distinct rhyme. But in Spenser the second rhyme is repeated four times, and the third three.” This correct statement also includes the fact of there being nine lines in the one and eight in the other,—but not that the ninth is an alexandrine. All poets have, since Warton’s time, agreed in thinking the Spenserian stanza the finest ever conceived by the soul of music;—and what various delightful specimens of it have we now in our language! Thomson’s *Castle of Indolence*, Shenstone’s *Schoolmistress*, Beattie’s *Minstrel*, Burns’s *Cotter’s Saturday Night*, Campbell’s *Gertrude of Wyoming*, Scott’s *Don Roderick*, Wordsworth’s *Female Vagrant*, Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam*, Keats’s *Eve of St. Agnes*, Croly’s *Angel of the World*, Byron’s *Childe Harold*! And many “a lovely lay” might be added to the list; for it would seem that so divine is the nature of the stanza that even mediocre poets, with a fair or fine ear, become inspired beyond themselves, “even by the sounds themselves have made,” and that almost any lyre sends pleasant music from its strings, however even

unskilfully constructed on the model of Spenser's, and struck by no master's hand, but even the clumsy fingers of a journeyman, or the feeble ones of an apprentice. The only proof of the pudding is the eating of it. The *Faerie Queene* proves that in choosing—that is, inventing—his stanza Spenser did sufficiently consult the genius of the English language, which is in all things superior to any other language now spoken by men. . . . A language like the Italian, so open that you cannot speak it without rhyming, is the very worst of all, for rhymes should not come till they are sought,—if they do, they give no pleasurable touch, “no gentle shock of mild surprise,” but, like intrusive fools, keep jingling their cap and bells in your ears, if not to your indifference, to your great disgust—and you wish they were all dead. Not so with the fine, bold, stern, muscular, masculine, firm-knit, and heroic language of England. Let no poet dare to complain of the poverty of its words in what Warton calls “identical cadences.” The music of their endings is magnificent, and it is infinite. And we conclude with flinging in the teeth of the sciolist, who is prating perhaps of the superiority of the German, a copy, bound in calf-skin, of Walker's *Rhyming Dictionary*; for the shade of Spenser might frown, while it smiled, were we to knock the blockhead down with our vellum volume of the *Faerie Queene*. . . .

What Dryden really meant by asserting that there is no unity of design in the *Faerie Queene*¹² we do not know. He was habitually the rashest and most heedless of critics, and there are more inconsistencies and contradictions in the shortest of his prefaces—spirited as they all are, and agreeably off-handed—than in any canto of that poem. For a spurt, Glorious John might have been safely backed at odds against any poet of his own century; but he has given no proof of being able to conceive unity of design in any extensive work, and must very soon have been bewildered in the woods of Fairy Land. He knew but street scenery, and was ignorant of all manner of trees. Nor had he by nature any sense of the beautiful, the

¹² In the *Dedication of the Æneis*: “Spenser has a better plea for his *Fairy Queen* [i.e., for a place among great epics], had his action been finished, or had been one.”

pathetic, or the sublime. He is the only powerful poet of whom it can be said that he never drew a tear—never awakened one thought that lay too deep for tears. Of the shadowy world of idealities and abstractions, he has nowhere shown one glimpse of knowledge; and even on his own ground, how far inferior was he to Spenser!

WHAT IS POETRY?

LEIGH HUNT

[This essay, the full title of which was "An Answer to the Question, What is Poetry?", formed the introduction to Hunt's volume of poetical selections called *Imagination and Fancy*, published 1844.]

Poetry, strictly and artistically so called,—that is to say, considered not merely as poetic feeling, which is more or less shared by all the world, but as the operation of that feeling, such as we see it in the poet's book,—is the utterance of a passion for truth, beauty, and power, embodying and illustrating its conceptions by imagination and fancy, and modulating its language on the principle of variety in uniformity. Its means are whatever the universe contains; and its ends, pleasure and exultation. Poetry stands between nature and convention, keeping alive among us the enjoyment of the external and the spiritual world; it has constituted the most enduring fame of nations; and, next to Love and Beauty, which are its parents, is the greatest proof to man of the pleasure to be found in all things, and of the probable riches of infinitude.

Poetry is a passion,¹ because it seeks the deepest impressions; and because it must undergo, in order to convey them.

It is a passion for truth, because without truth the impression would be false or defective.

It is a passion for beauty, because its office is to exalt and refine by means of pleasure, and because beauty is nothing but the loveliest form of pleasure.

¹ *Passio*, suffering in a good sense,—ardent subjection of one's self to emotion. [Hunt's note.]

It is a passion for power, because power is impression triumphant, whether over the poet, as desired by himself, or over the reader, as affected by the poet.

It embodies and illustrates its impressions by imagination, or images of the objects of which it treats, and other images brought in to throw light on those objects, in order that it may enjoy and impart the feeling of their truth in its utmost conviction and affluence.

It illustrates them by fancy, which is a lighter play of imagination, or the feeling of analogy coming short of seriousness, in order that it may laugh with what it loves, and show how it can decorate it with fairy ornament.

It modulates what it utters, because in running the whole round of beauty it must needs include beauty of sound; and because, in the height of its enjoyment, it must show the perfection of its triumph, and make difficulty itself become part of its facility and joy.

And lastly, Poetry shapes this modulation into uniformity for its outline, and variety for its parts, because it thus realizes the last idea of beauty itself, which includes the charm of diversity within the flowing round of habit and ease.

Poetry is imaginative passion. The quickest and subtlest test of the possession of its essence is in expression; the variety of things to be expressed shows the amount of its resources; and the continuity of the song completes the evidence of its strength and greatness. He who has thought, feeling, expression, imagination, action, character, and continuity, all in the largest amount and highest degree, is the greatest poet.

Poetry includes whatsoever of painting can be made visible to the mind's eye, and whatsoever of music can be conveyed by sound and proportion without singing or instrumentation. But it far surpasses those divine arts in suggestiveness, range, and intellectual wealth;—the first, in expression of thought, combination of images, and the triumph over space and time; the second, in all that can be done by speech, apart from the tones and modulations of pure sound. Painting and music, however, include all those portions of the gift of poetry that can be expressed and heightened by the visible and melodious. Painting, in a certain apparent manner, is things themselves;

music, in a certain audible manner, is their very emotion and grace. Music and painting are proud to be related to poetry, and poetry loves and is proud of them.

Poetry begins where matter of fact or of science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth, that is to say, the connection it has with the world of emotion, and its power to produce imaginative pleasure. Inquiring of a gardener, for instance, what flower it is we see yonder, he answers, "A lily." This is matter of fact. The botanist pronounces it to be of the order of *Hexandria monogynia*. This is matter of science. It is the "lady" of the garden, says Spenser;² and here we begin to have a poetical sense of its fairness and grace. It is

The plant and flower of *light*,

says Ben Jonson;³ and poetry then shows us the beauty of the flower in all its mystery and splendor.

If it be asked how we know perceptions like these to be true, the answer is, by the fact of their existence—by the consent and delight of poetic readers. And as feeling is the earliest teacher, and perception the only final proof of things the most demonstrable by science, so the remotest imaginations of the poets may often be found to have the closest connection with matter of fact; perhaps might always be so, if the subtlety of our perceptions were a match for the causes of them. Consider this image of Ben Jonson's—of a lily being the flower of light. Light, undecomposed, is white; and as the lily is white, and light is white, and whiteness itself is nothing *but* light, the two things, so far, are not merely similar, but identical. A poet might add, by an analogy drawn from the connection of light and color, that there is a "golden dawn" issuing out of the white lily, in the rich yellow of the stamens. I have no desire to push this similarity farther than it may be worth. Enough has been stated to show that, in poetical as well as in other analogies, "the same feet of Nature," as Bacon says, may be seen "treading in different paths";⁴ and that the most scornful, that

² "The lily, lady of the flowing field" (*Faerie Queene*, Bk. ii, canto vi, stanza 16).

³ In the "Ode on the Death of Sir Henry Morison."

⁴ *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. ii. For the exact words of Bacon, see page 279, note 2.

is to say, dullest disciple of fact should be cautious how he betrays the shallowness of his philosophy by discerning no poetry in its depths.

But the poet is far from dealing only with these subtle and analogical truths. Truth of every kind belongs to him, provided it can bud into any kind of beauty, or is capable of being illustrated and impressed by the poetic faculty. Nay, the simplest truth is often so beautiful and impressive of itself, that one of the greatest proofs of his genius consists in his leaving it to stand alone, illustrated by nothing but the light of its own tears or smiles, its own wonder, might, or playfulness. Hence the complete effect of many a simple passage in our old English ballads and romances, and of the passionate sincerity in general of the greatest early poets, such as Homer and Chaucer, who flourished before the existence of a "literary world," and were not perplexed by a heap of notions and opinions, or by doubts how emotion ought to be expressed. The greatest of their successors never write equally to the purpose, except when they can dismiss everything from their minds but the like simple truth. In the beautiful poem of "Sir Eger, Sir Graham, and Sir Gray-Steel" (see it in Ellis's *Specimens*, or Laing's *Early Metrical Tales*), a knight thinks himself disgraced in the eyes of his mistress:—

Sir Eger says, "If it be so,
Then wot I well I must forego
Love-liking, and manhood, all clean."
The water rushed out of his een!

Sir Gray-Steel is killed:—

Gray-Steel into his death thus thrawes [throes?]
He walters [welters—throws himself about] and the grass
up draws; . . .
A little while then lay he still,
(Friends that him saw liked full ill)
And blood into his armour bright.

The abode of Chaucer's Reeve, or Steward, in the *Canterbury Tales*, is painted in two lines which nobody ever wished longer:

His wonyng [dwelling] was ful fair upon an heeth;
With grene trees i-shadwed was his place.

Every one knows the words of Lear, "most *matter-of-fact*, most melancholy":

Pray do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.⁵

It is thus, by exquisite pertinence, melody, and the implied power of writing with exuberance, if need be, that beauty and truth become identical in poetry, and that pleasure, or at the very worst, a balm in our tears, is drawn out of pain.

It is a great and rare thing, and shows a lovely imagination, when the poet can write a commentary, as it were, of his own, on such sufficing passages of nature, and be thanked for the addition. There is an instance of this kind in Warner, an old Elizabethan poet, than which I know nothing sweeter in the world. He is speaking of Fair Rosamond, and of a blow given her by Queen Eleanor:

With that she dasht her on the lippes, so dyed double red:
Hard was the heart that gave the blow, soft were those lips
that bled.⁶

There are different kinds and degrees of imagination, some of them necessary to the formation of every true poet, and all of them possessed by the greatest. Perhaps they may be enumerated as follows:—First, that which presents to the mind any object or circumstance in every-day life, as when we imagine a man holding a sword, or looking out of a window; Second, that which presents real, but not every-day circumstances, as King Alfred tending the loaves, or Sir Philip Sidney giving up the water to the dying soldier; Third, that which combines character and events imitated from real life with imitative realities of its own invention, as the probable parts

⁵ IV, vii, 59-63.

⁶ *Albion's England*, VIII, xli, stanza 53.

of the histories of Priam and Macbeth, or what may be called natural fiction as distinguished from supernatural; Fourth, that which conjures up things and events not to be found in nature, as Homer's gods and Shakespeare's witches, enchanted horses and spears, Ariosto's hippogriff, etc.; Fifth, that which, in order to illustrate or aggravate one image, introduces another: sometimes in simile, as when Homer compares Apollo descending in his wrath at noon-day to the coming of night-time;⁷ sometimes in metaphor or simile comprised in a word, as Milton's "motes that *people* the sunbeams";⁸ sometimes in concentrating into a word the main history of any person or thing, past or even future, as in the "starry Galileo" of Byron,⁹ and that ghastly foregone conclusion of the epithet "murdered" applied to the yet living victim in Keats's story from Boccaccio,—

So the two brothers and their *murdered* man
Rode past fair Florence;¹⁰

sometimes in the attribution of a certain representative quality which makes one circumstance stand for others, as in Milton's gray-fly winding its "*sultry* horn,"¹¹ which epithet contains the heat of a summer's day; Sixth, that which reverses this process, and makes a variety of circumstances take color from one, like nature seen with jaundiced or glad eyes, or under the influence of storm or sunshine; as when in *Lycidas*, or the Greek pastoral poets, the flowers and the flocks are made to sympathize with a man's death; or, in the Italian poet, the river flowing by the sleeping Angelica seems talking of love—

Parca che l'erba a lei fiorisse intorno,
E d'amor ragionasse quella riva!—¹²

or in the voluptuous homage paid to the sleeping Imogen by the very light in the chamber and the reaction of her own beauty upon itself;¹³ or in the "witch element" of the

⁷ *Iliad*, i, 47.

⁸ *Il Penseroso*, line 8.

⁹ *Childe Harold*, canto iv, line 485.

¹⁰ "Isabella," stanza 27.

¹¹ "Lycidas," line 28.

¹² Bolardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, I, iii, 69.

¹³ *Cymbeline*, II, ii, 19-21; see Hazlitt, p. 225.

tragedy of *Macbeth* and the May-day night of *Faust*; Seventh, and last, that by which a single expression, apparently of the vaguest kind, not only meets but surpasses in its effect the extremest force of the most particular description; as in that exquisite passage of Coleridge's *Christabel*, where the unsuspecting object of the witch's malignity is bidden to go to bed:

Quoth Christabel, So let it be!
And as the lady bade, did she,
Her gentle limbs did she undress,
And lay down in her loveliness:

a perfect verse surely, both for feeling and music. The very smoothness and gentleness of the limbs is in the series of the letter l's.

I am aware of nothing of the kind surpassing that most lovely inclusion of physical beauty in moral, neither can I call to mind any instances of the imagination that turns accompaniments into accessories, superior to those I have alluded to. Of the class of comparison, one of the most touching (many a tear must it have drawn from parents and lovers) is in a stanza which has been copied into the "Friar of Orders Gray"¹⁴ out of Beaumont and Fletcher:

Weep no more, lady, weep no more,
Thy sorrow is in vaine;
For violets pluckt the sweetest showers
Will ne'er make grow againe.

And Shakespeare and Milton abound in the very grandest; such as Antony's likening his changing fortunes to the cloud-rack;¹⁵ Lear's appeal to the old age of the heavens;¹⁶ Satan's appearance in the horizon, like a fleet "hanging in the clouds"; and the comparisons of him with the comet and the eclipse.¹⁷ Nor unworthy of this glorious company, for its extraordinary combination of delicacy and vastness, is that enchanting one of Shelley's in the *Adonais*:

¹⁴ A ballad in Percy's *Reliques*, in which he included various fragmentary passages of early poetry; this stanza, in altered form, was taken from a song in *The Queen of Corinth*, III, ii.

¹⁵ *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xiv, 2-13.

¹⁶ *King Lear*, II, iv, 192ff. Compare Lamb and Hazlitt, pp. 183, 225.

¹⁷ *Paradise Lost*, ii, 636-37; ii, 708-11; i, 596-99.

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity.

I multiply these particulars in order to impress upon the reader's mind the great importance of imagination in all its phases, as a constituent part of the highest poetic faculty.

The happiest instance I remember of imaginative metaphor is Shakespeare's moonlight "sleeping" on a bank;¹⁸ but half his poetry may be said to be made up of it, metaphor indeed being the common coin of discourse. Of imaginary creatures none, out of the pale of mythology and the East, are equal, perhaps, in point of invention, to Shakespeare's Ariel and Caliban; though poetry may grudge to prose the discovery of a Winged Woman, especially such as she has been described by her inventor in the story of *Peter Wilkins*,¹⁹ and in point of treatment, the Mammon and Jealousy of Spenser,²⁰ some of the monsters in Dante, particularly his Nimrod,²¹ his interchanges of creatures into one another, and (if I am not presumptuous in anticipating what I think will be the verdict of posterity) the Witch in Coleridge's *Christabel*, may rank even with the creations of Shakespeare. It may be doubted, indeed, whether Shakespeare had bile and nightmare enough in him to have thought of such detestable horrors as those of the interchanging adversaries (now serpent, now man),²² or even of the huge, half-blockish enormity of Nimrod,—in Scripture, the "mighty hunter" and builder of the tower of Babel,—in Dante, a tower of a man in his own person, standing with some of his brother giants up to the middle in a pit in hell, blowing a horn to which a thunder-clap is a whisper, and hallooing after Dante and his guide in the jargon of a lost tongue!²³ . . . Assuredly it would not have been easy to find a fiction so uncouthly terrible as this in the hypochondria of Hamlet. Even his father had evidently seen

¹⁸ *Merchant of Venice*, V, i, 54.

¹⁹ By Robert Paltock, 1751.

²⁰ *Faerie Queene*, Bk. ii, canto vii, stanzas 3-5; Bk. iii, canto x, stanzas 54-60.

²¹ *Inferno*, xxxi, 34-81.

²² *Ibid.*, xxv, 49-138.

²³ The omitted passage consists chiefly of the quotation of Dante's account of Nimrod.

no such ghost in the other world. All his phantoms were in the world he had left. Timon, Lear, Richard, Brutus, Prospero, Macbeth himself, none of Shakespeare's men had, in fact, any thought but of the earth they lived on, whatever supernatural fancy crossed them. The thing fancied was still a thing of this world, "in its habit as it lived," or no remoter acquaintance than a witch or a fairy. Its lowest depths (unless Dante suggested them) were the cellars under the stage. Caliban himself is a cross-breed between a witch and a clown. No offense to Shakespeare; who was not bound to be the greatest of healthy poets and to have every morbid inspiration besides. What he might have done, had he set his wits to compete with Dante, I know not; all I know is, that in the infernal line he did nothing like him; and it is not to be wished he had. It is far better that, as a higher, more universal, and more beneficent variety of the genus Poet, he should have been the happier man he was, and left us the plump cheeks on his monument, instead of the carking visage of the great, but over-serious and comparatively one-sided Florentine. Even the imagination of Spenser, whom we take to have been a "nervous gentleman" compared with Shakespeare, was visited with no such dreams as Dante. Or, if it was, he did not choose to make himself thinner (as Dante says *he* did) with dwelling upon them. He had twenty visions of nymphs and bowers, to one of the mud of Tartarus. Chaucer, for all he was a "man of this world" as well as the poets' world, and as great, perhaps a greater enemy of oppression than Dante, besides being one of the profoundest masters of pathos that ever lived, had not the heart to conclude the story of the famished father and his children,²⁴ as finished by the inexorable anti-Pisan. But enough of Dante in this place. Hobbes, in order to daunt the reader from objecting to his friend Davenant's want of invention, says of these fabulous creatures in general, in his letter prefixed to the poem of *Gondibert*,²⁵ that "impene-trable armors, enchanted castles, invulnerable bodies, iron men, flying horses, and a thousand other such things,

²⁴ The story of Ugolino of Pisa, related by Dante in the *Inferno*, canto xxxiii, by Chaucer in "The Monk's Tale," lines 3597-3652.

²⁵ By Davenant, 1651.

are easily feigned by them that dare." These are girds at Spenser and Ariosto. But, with leave of Hobbes (who translated Homer as if on purpose to show what execrable verses could be written by a philosopher), enchanted castles and flying horses are not easily feigned, as Ariosto and Spenser feigned them; and that just makes all the difference. For proof, see the accounts of Spenser's enchanted castle in Book the Third, Canto Twelfth, of the *Fairy Queen*; and let the reader of Italian open the *Orlando Furioso* at its first introduction of the Hippogriff (iv, 4), where Bradamante, coming to an inn, hears a great noise, and sees all the people looking up at something in the air; upon which, looking up herself, she sees a knight in shining armor riding towards the sunset upon a creature with variegated wings, and then dipping and disappearing among the hills. Chaucer's steed of brass, that was "so horsly and so quik of yē,"²⁶ is copied from the life. You might pat him and feel his brazen muscles. Hobbes, in objecting to what he thought childish, made a childish mistake. His criticism is just such as a boy might pique himself upon, who was educated on mechanical principles, and thought he had outgrown his Goody Two-shoes. With a wonderful dimness of discernment in poetic matters, considering his acuteness in others, he fancies he has settled the question by pronouncing such creations "impossible"! To the brazier they are impossible, no doubt; but not to the poet. Their possibility, if the poet wills it, is to be conceded; the problem is, the creature being given, how to square its actions with probability, according to the nature assumed of it. Hobbes did not see that the skill and beauty of these fictions lay in bringing them within those very regions of truth and likelihood in which he thought they could not exist. Hence the serpent python of Chaucer,

Slepyng agayn the sonne upon a day,²⁷

when Apollo slew him. Hence the chariot-drawing dolphins of Spenser, softly swimming along the shore lest they should hurt themselves against the stones and gravel.²⁸

²⁶ "The Squire's Tale," line 194.

²⁷ "The Manciple's Tale," line 110.

²⁸ *Faerie Queene*, Bk. iii, canto iv, stanzas 33-34.

Hence Shakespeare's Ariel, living under blossoms, and riding at evening on the bat; and his domestic namesake in the *Rape of the Lock* (the imagination of the drawing-room) saving a lady's petticoat from the coffee with his plumes, and directing atoms of snuff into a coxcomb's nose.²⁹ In the *Orlando Furioso* (xv, 65) is a wild story of a cannibal necromancer, who laughs at being cut to pieces, coming together again like quicksilver, and picking up his head when it is cut off, sometimes by the hair, sometimes by the nose! This, which would be purely childish and ridiculous in the hands of an inferior poet, becomes interesting, nay grand, in Ariosto's, from the beauties of his style, and its conditional truth to nature. The monster has a fated hair on his head—a single hair—which must be taken from it before he can be killed. Decapitation itself is of no consequence, without that proviso. The Paladin Astolfo, who has fought this phenomenon on horseback, and succeeded in getting the head and galloping off with it, is therefore still at a loss what to be at. How is he to discover such a needle in such a bottle of hay? The trunk is spurring after him to recover it, and he seeks for some evidence of the hair in vain. At length he bethinks him of scalping the head. He does so; and the moment the operation arrives at the place of the hair, *the face of the head becomes pale, the eyes turn in their sockets*, and the lifeless pursuer tumbles from his horse. . . . It is thus, and thus only, by making Nature his companion wherever he goes, even in the most supernatural region, that the poet, in the words of a very instructive phrase, takes the world along with him. It is true he must not (as the Platonists would say) humanize weakly or mistakenly in that region; otherwise he runs the chance of forgetting to be true to the supernatural itself, and so betraying a want of imagination from that quarter. His nymphs will have no taste of their woods and waters; his gods and goddesses be only so many fair or frowning ladies and gentlemen, such as we see in ordinary paintings; he will be in no danger of having his angels likened to a sort of wild-fowl, as Rembrandt has made them in his Jacob's Dream. His Bac-

²⁹ See canto iii, lines 113-16, and canto v, lines 83-86.

chuses will never remind us, like Titian's, of the force and fury as well as of the graces of wine. His Jupiter will reduce no females to ashes; his fairies be nothing fantastical; his gnomes not "of the earth, earthy." And this again will be wanting to Nature; for it will be wanting to the supernatural, as Nature would have made it, working in a supernatural direction. Nevertheless, the poet, even for imagination's sake, must not become a bigot to imaginative truth, dragging it down into the region of the mechanical and the limited, and losing sight of its paramount privilege, which is to make beauty, in a human sense, the lady and queen of the universe. He would gain nothing by making his ocean-nymphs mere fishy creatures, upon the plea that such only could live in the water; his wood-nymphs with faces of knotted oak; his angels without breath and song, because no lungs could exist between the earth's atmosphere and the empyrean. The Grecian tendency in this respect is safer than the Gothic; nay, more imaginative; for it enables us to imagine *beyond* imagination, and to bring all things healthily round to their only present final ground of sympathy—the human. When we go to heaven, we may idealize in a superhuman mode, and have altogether different notions of the beautiful; but till then we must be content with the loveliest capabilities of earth. The sea-nymphs of Greece were still beautiful women, though they lived in the water. The gills and fins of the ocean's natural inhabitants were confined to their lowest semi-human attendants; or if Triton himself was not quite human, it was because he represented the fiercer part of the vitality of the seas, as they did the fairer.³⁰ . . .

The reverse of imagination is exhibited in pure absence of ideas, in commonplaces, and, above all, in conventional metaphor, or such images and their phraseology as have become the common property of discourse and writing. Addison's *Cato* is full of them:³¹

Passion unpitied and successful love
Plant daggers in my heart.

³⁰ The omitted passage presents two examples of the imagination from the poetry of Homer.

³¹ Compare Macaulay, p. 348.

I've sounded my Numidians, man by man,
And find 'em ripe for a revolt.

The virtuous Marcia towers above her sex.

Of the same kind is his "courting the yoke"—"distracting my very soul"—"calling up all" one's "father" in one's soul—"working every nerve"—"copying a bright example"; in short, the whole play, relieved now and then with a smart sentence or turn of words. The following is a pregnant example of plagiarism and weak writing. It is from another tragedy of Addison's time, the *Mariamne* of Fenton:

Mariamne, with superior charms,
Triumphs o'er reason; in her look she bears
A paradise of ever-blooming sweets;
Fair as the first idea beauty prints
In the young lover's soul; a winning grace
Guides every gesture, and obsequious love
Attends on all her steps.

"Triumphing o'er reason" is an old acquaintance of everybody's. "Paradise in her look" is from the Italian poets through Dryden. "Fair as the first idea," etc., is from Milton, spoilt; "winning grace" and "steps" from Milton and Tibullus,³² both spoilt. Whenever beauties are stolen by such a writer, they are sure to be spoilt; just as when a great writer borrows, he improves.

To come now to Fancy,—she is a younger sister of Imagination, without the other's weight of thought and feeling. Imagination indeed, purely so called, is all feeling; the feeling of the subtlest and most affecting analogies; the perception of sympathies in the nature of things, or in their popular attributes. Fancy is a sporting with their resemblance, real or supposed, and with airy and fantastical creations:

Rouse yourself; and the weak wanton Cupid
Shall from your neck unloose his amorous fold,

³² See *Paradise Lost*, viii, 60-61: "On her as queen a pomp of winning graces waited still;" and Tibullus, IV, ii, 7-8, lines which have been translated:

Whatsoever the maid be doing, wheresoe'er her steps she bends,
Perfect grace is shed around her, perfect grace in stealth attends.

*And, like a dew-drop from the lion's mane,
Be shook to air.*³³

That is imagination; the strong mind sympathizing with the strong beast, and the weak love identified with the weak dew-drop.

And I, forsooth, in love! I, that have been love's whip;
A very beadle to a humorous sigh;
A domineering pedant o'er the boy; . . .
This wimpled, whining, purblind, wayward boy,
This senior-junior, giant-dwarf, Dan Cupid;
Regent of love-rimes, lord of folded arms,
The anointed sovereign of sighs and groans, etc.³⁴

That is fancy; a combination of images not in their nature connected, or brought together by the feeling, but by the will and pleasure; and having just enough hold of analogy to betray it into the hands of its smiling subjector.

Silent icicles
*Quietly shining to the quiet moon.*³⁵

That, again, is imagination—analogical sympathy; and exquisite of its kind it is.

You are now sailed *into the north of my lady's opinion*; where you will hang *like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard*, unless you do redeem it by some laudable attempt.³⁶

And that is fancy; one image capriciously suggested by another, and but half connected with the subject of discourse; nay, half opposed to it; for, in the gayety of the speaker's animal spirits, the "Dutchman's beard" is made to represent the lady!

Imagination belongs to Tragedy, or the serious Muse; Fancy to the comic. *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Paradise Lost*, the poem of Dante, are full of imagination: the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Rape of the Lock*, of fancy; *Romeo and Juliet*, the *Tempest*, the *Fairy Queen*, and the *Orlando Furioso*, of both. The terms were formerly

³³ *Troilus and Cressida*, III, iii, 222-25.

³⁴ *Love's Labour's Lost*, III, i, 175-84.

³⁵ From Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight."

³⁶ *Twelfth Night*, III, ii, 27-30.

identical, or used as such; and neither is the best that might be found. The term Imagination is too confined; often too material. It presents too invariably the idea of a solid body—of “images” in the sense of the plaster-cast cry about the streets. Fancy, on the other hand, while it means nothing but a spiritual image or apparition (*φάντασμα*, appearance, *phantom*), has rarely that freedom from visibility which is one of the highest privileges of imagination. Viola, in *Twelfth Night*, speaking of some beautiful music, says:

It gives a very echo to the seat
Where Love is throned.³⁷

In this charming thought, fancy and imagination are combined; yet the fancy, the assumption of Love's sitting on a throne, is the image of a solid body; while the imagination, the sense of sympathy between the passion of love and impassioned music, presents us no image at all. Some new term is wanting to express the more spiritual sympathies of what is called Imagination.

One of the teachers of Imagination is Melancholy; and like Melancholy, as Albert Dürer has painted her, she looks out among the stars, and is busied with spiritual affinities and the mysteries of the universe. Fancy turns her sister's wizard instruments into toys. She takes a telescope in her hand, and puts a mimic star on her forehead, and sallies forth as an emblem of astronomy. Her tendency is to the childlike and sportive. She chases butterflies, while her sister takes flight with angels. She is the genius of fairies, of gallantries, of fashions; of whatever is quaint and light, showy and capricious; of the poetical part of wit.³⁸ She adds wings and feelings to the images of wit; and delights as much to people nature with smiling ideal sympathies, as wit does to bring antipathies together, and make them strike light on absurdity. Fancy, however, is not incapable of sympathy with Imagination. She is often found in her company; always, in the case of the greatest poets; often in that of less, though with them she is the greater favorite.

³⁷ II, iv, 21-22.

³⁸ Compare Wordsworth, p. 42.

Spenser has great imagination and fancy too, but more of the latter; Milton, both also, the very greatest, but with imagination predominant; Chaucer the strongest imagination of real life, beyond any writers but Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, and in comic painting inferior to none; Pope has hardly any imagination, but he has a great deal of fancy; Coleridge little fancy, but imagination exquisite. Shakespeare alone, of all the poets that ever lived, enjoyed the regard of both in equal perfection. A whole fairy poem of his writing will be found in the present volume.³⁹ See also his famous description of Queen Mab and her equipage, in *Romeo and Juliet*:

Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
The traces of the smallest spider's web,
The collars of the moonshine's watery beams, etc.⁴⁰

That is Fancy, in its playful creativeness. As a small but pretty rival specimen, less known, take the description of a fairy palace from Drayton's *Nymphidia*:

. . . The walls of spiders' legs are made,
Well mortised and finely laid;
He was the master of his trade,
It curiously that builded:
The windows of the eyes of cats:

(because they see best at night),

And for the roof, instead of slats,
Is covered with the skins of bats
With moonshine that are gilded.

Here also is a fairy bed, very delicate, from the same poet's *Muses' Elysium*:

Of leaves of roses, white and red,
Shall be the covering of her bed;
The curtains, vallens, tester all
Shall be the flower imperial;

³⁹ Hunt refers to extracts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he included in *Imagination and Fancy* under the title "The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania."

⁴⁰ I, iv, 59-62.

And for the fringe, it all along
 With azure harebells shall be hung.
 Of lilies shall the pillows be,
 With down stuff'd of the butterfly.

Of fancy, so full of gusto as to border on imagination, Sir John Suckling, in his "Ballad on a Wedding," has given some of the most playful and charming specimens in the language. They glance like twinkles of the eye, or cherries bedewed:

*Her feet beneath her petticoat
 Like little mice stole in and out,
 As if they feared the light;
 But oh! she dances such a way!
 No sun upon an Easter Day
 Is half so fine a sight.*

It is very daring, and has a sort of playful grandeur, to compare a lady's dancing with the sun. But as the sun has it all to himself in the heavens, so she, in the blaze of her beauty, on earth. This is imagination fairly displacing fancy. The following has enchanted everybody:

*Her lips were red, and one was thin
 Compared to that was next her chin,
 Some bee had stung it newly.*

Every reader has stolen a kiss at that lip, gay or grave.

With regard to the principle of Variety in Uniformity by which verse ought to be modulated, and oneness of impression diversely produced, it has been contended by some that Poetry need not be written in verse at all; that prose is as good a medium, provided poetry be conveyed through it; and that to think otherwise is to confound letter with spirit, or form with essence. But the opinion is a prosaical mistake. Fitness and unfitness for *song*, or metrical excitement, just make all the difference between a poetical and prosaical subject;⁴¹ and the reason why verse is necessary to the form of poetry is that the perfection of poetical spirit demands it;—that the circle of its enthusiasm, beauty and power, is incomplete with-

⁴¹ Compare Coleridge, p. 130.

out it. I do not mean to say that a poet can never show himself a poet in prose; but that, being one, his desire and necessity will be to write in verse; and that, if he were unable to do so, he would not, and could not, deserve his title. Verse to the true poet is no clog. It is idly called a trammel and a difficulty. It is a help. It springs from the same enthusiasm as the rest of his impulses, and is necessary to their satisfaction and effect. Verse is no more a clog than the condition of rushing upward is a clog to fire, or than the roundness and order of the globe we live on is a clog to the freedom and variety that abound within its sphere. Verse is no dominator over the poet, except inasmuch as the bond is reciprocal, and the poet dominates over the verse. They are lovers, playfully challenging each other's rule, and delighted equally to rule and to obey. Verse is the final proof to the poet that his mastery over his art is complete. It is the shutting up of his powers in "*measureful content*"; the answer of form to his spirit; of strength and ease to his guidance. It is the willing action, the proud and fiery happiness, of the winged steed on whose back he has vaulted,

To witch the world with wondrous horsemanship.⁴²

Verse, in short, is that finishing, and rounding, and "tuneful planeting" of the poet's creations, which is produced of necessity by the smooth tendencies of their energy or inward working, and the harmonious dance into which they are attracted round the orb of the beautiful. Poetry, in its complete sympathy with beauty, must of necessity leave no sense of the beautiful, and no power over its forms, unmanifested; and verse flows as inevitably from this condition of its integrity, as other laws of proportion do from any other kind of embodiment of beauty (say that of the human figure), however free and various the movements may be that play within their limits. What great poet ever wrote his poems in prose? or where is a good prose poem, of any length, to be found? The poetry of the Bible is understood to be in verse, in the original. Mr. Hazlitt has said a good word for those

⁴² *1 Henry IV*, IV, i, 110 (with "noble" for "wondrous").

prose enlargements of some fine old song, which are known by the name of Ossian;⁴³ and in passages they deserve what he said; but he judiciously abstained from saying anything about the form. Is Gessner's *Death of Abel*⁴⁴ a poem? or Hervey's *Meditations*?⁴⁵ *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been called one; and undoubtedly Bunyan had a genius which tended to make him a poet, and one of no mean order; and yet it was of as ungenerous and low a sort as was compatible with so lofty an affinity; and this is the reason why it stopped where it did. He had a craving after the beautiful, but not enough of it in himself to echo to its music. On the other hand, the possession of the beautiful will not be sufficient without force to utter it. The author of *Telemachus*⁴⁶ had a soul full of beauty and tenderness. He was not a man who, if he had had a wife and children, would have run away from them, as Bunyan's hero did, to get a place by himself in heaven.⁴⁷ He was "a little lower than the angels," like our own Bishop Jewells and Berkeleys; and yet he was no poet. He was too delicately, not to say feebly, absorbed in his devotions to join in the energies of the seraphic choir.

Every poet, then, is a versifier; every fine poet an excellent one; and he is the best whose verse exhibits the greatest amount of strength, sweetness, straightforwardness, unsuperfluity, variety and oneness;—oneness, that is to say, consistency, in the general impression, metrical and moral, and variety, or every pertinent diversity of tone and rhythm, in the process.⁴⁸ . . .

If a young reader should ask, after all, What is the quickest way of knowing bad poets from good, the best poets from the next best, and so on? the answer is, the

⁴³ At the close of his lecture "On Poetry in General."

⁴⁴ An idyl by a Swiss writer, published 1758.

⁴⁵ A religious work by James Hervey (*Meditations and Contemplations*), published 1746-47.

⁴⁶ By Fénelon, a French prelate (1661-1715).

⁴⁷ This remark is due to a misapprehension of the allegory of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Christian stands for the individual soul in search of salvation and his leaving of his family represents the forsaking of the realm of sin.

⁴⁸ The omitted section discusses in some detail the principles of verse-form.

only and twofold way: first, the perusal of the best poets with the greatest attention; and, second, the cultivation of that love of truth and beauty which made them what they are. Every true reader of poetry partakes a more than ordinary portion of the poetic nature; and no one can be completely such who does not love, or take an interest in, everything that interests the poet, from the firmament to the daisy,—from the highest heart of man to the most pitiable of the low. It is a good practice to read with pen in hand, marking what is liked or doubted. It rivets the attention, realizes the greatest amount of enjoyment, and facilitates reference. It enables the reader also, from time to time, to see what progress he makes with his own mind, and how it grows up toward the stature of its exalter.

If the same person should ask, What class of poetry is the highest? I should say, undoubtedly, the epic; for it includes the drama, with narration besides; or the speaking and action of the characters with the speaking of the poet himself, whose utmost address is taxed to relate all well for so long a time, particularly in the passages least sustained by enthusiasm. Whether this class has included the greatest poet, is another question still under trial; for Shakespeare perplexes all such verdicts, even when the claimant is Homer; though, if a judgment may be drawn from his early narratives (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*), it is to be doubted whether even Shakespeare could have told a story like Homer, owing to that excessive activity and superfœtation of thought, a little less of which might be occasionally desired even in his plays,—if it were possible, once possessing anything of his, to wish it away. Next to Homer and Shakespeare come such narrators as the less universal but still intenser Dante; Milton, with his dignified imagination; the universal, profoundly simple Chaucer; and luxuriant, remote Spenser—immortal child in poetry's most poetic solitudes: then the great second-rate dramatists, unless those who are better acquainted with Greek tragedy than I am demand a place for them before Chaucer: then the airy, yet robust universality of Ariosto; the hearty, out-of-door nature of Theocritus, also a universalist; the finest lyrical poets (who only take short

flights, compared with the narrators); the purely contemplative poets who have more thought than feeling; the descriptive, satirical, didactic, epigrammatic. It is to be borne in mind, however, that the first poet of an inferior class may be superior to followers in the train of a higher one, though the superiority is by no means to be taken for granted; otherwise Pope would be superior to Fletcher, and Butler to Pope. Imagination, teeming with action and character, makes the greatest poets; feeling and thought the next; fancy (by itself) the next; wit the last. Thought by itself makes no poet at all; for the mere conclusions of the understanding can at best be only so many intellectual matters of fact. Feeling, even destitute of conscious thought, stands a far better poetical chance; feeling being a sort of thought without the process of thinking—a grasper of the truth without seeing it. And what is very remarkable, feeling seldom makes the blunders that thought does. An idle distinction has been made between taste and judgment. Taste is the very maker of judgment. Put an artificial fruit in your mouth, or only handle it, and you will soon perceive the difference between judging from taste or tact and judging from the abstract figment called judgment.⁴⁹ The latter does but throw you into guesses and doubts. Hence the conceits that astonish us in the gravest and even subtlest thinkers, whose taste is not proportionate to their mental perceptions: men like Donne,⁵⁰ for instance, who, apart from accidental personal impressions, seem to look at nothing as it really is, but only as to what may be thought of it. Hence, on the other hand, the delightfulness of those poets who never violate truth of feeling, whether in things real or imaginary; who are always consistent with their object and its requirements; and who run the great round of nature, not to perplex and be perplexed, but to make themselves and us happy. And luckily, delightfulness is not incompatible with greatness, willing soever as men may be in their present imperfect state to set the power to subjugate above the power to please. Truth, of any great kind whatsoever, makes great writing. This is the reason why such poets as Ariosto, though

⁴⁹ Compare De Quincey, p. 323.

⁵⁰ One of the poets called "metaphysical" (1573-1631).

not writing with a constant detail of thought and feeling like Dante, are justly considered great as well as delightful. Their greatness proves itself by the same truth of nature, and sustained power, though in a different way. Their action is not so crowded and weighty; their sphere has more territories less fertile; but it has enchantments of its own, which excess of thought would spoil,—luxuries, laughing graces, animal spirits; and not to recognize the beauty and greatness of these, treated as they treat them, is simply to be defective in sympathy. Every planet is not Mars or Saturn. There is also Venus and Mercury. There is one genius of the south, and another of the north, and others uniting both. The reader who is too thoughtless or too sensitive to like intensity of any sort, and he who is too thoughtful or too dull to like anything but the greatest possible stimulus of reflection or passion, are equally wanting in complexional fitness for a thorough enjoyment of books. Ariosto occasionally says as fine things as Dante, and Spenser as Shakespeare; but the business of both is to enjoy; and in order to partake their enjoyment to its full extent, you must feel what poetry is in the general as well as the particular, must be aware that there are different songs of the spheres, some fuller of notes, and others of a sustained delight; and as the former keep you perpetually alive to thought or passion, so from the latter you receive a constant harmonious sense of truth and beauty, more agreeable perhaps on the whole, though less exciting. Ariosto, for instance, does not tell a story with the brevity and concentrated passion of Dante; every sentence is not so full of matter, nor the style so removed from the indifference of prose; yet you are charmed with a truth of another sort, equally characteristic of the writer, equally drawn from nature, and substituting a healthy sense of enjoyment for intenser emotion. Exclusiveness of liking for this or that mode of truth only shows, either that a reader's perceptions are limited, or that he would sacrifice truth itself to his favorite form of it. Sir Walter Raleigh, who was as trenchant with his pen as his sword, hailed the *Faerie Queene* of his friend Spenser in verses in which he said that Petrarch was thenceforward to be no more heard of, and that in all English poetry there was nothing he

counted "of any price" but the effusions of the new author.⁵¹ Yet Petrarch is still living; Chaucer was not abolished by Sir Walter; and Shakespeare is thought somewhat valuable. A botanist might as well have said that myrtles and oaks were to disappear because acacias had come up. It is with the poet's creations as with Nature's, great or small. Wherever truth and beauty, whatever their amount, can be worthily shaped into verse, and answer to some demand for it in our hearts, there poetry is to be found; whether in productions grand and beautiful as some great event, or some mighty, leafy solitude, or no bigger and more pretending than a sweet face or a bunch of violets; whether in Homer's epic or Gray's *Elegy*, in the enchanted gardens of Ariosto and Spenser, or the very pot-herbs of the *Schoolmistress* of Shenstone, the balms of the simplicity of a cottage. Not to know and feel this is to be deficient in the universality of Nature herself, who is a poetess on the smallest as well as the largest scale, and who calls upon us to admire all her productions,—not indeed with the same degree of admiration, but with no refusal of it, except to defect.

I cannot draw this essay towards its conclusion better than with three memorable words of Milton, who has said that poetry, in comparison with science, is "simple, sensuous, and passionate."⁵² By simple, he means unperplexed and self-evident; by sensuous, genial and full of imagery; by passionate, excited and enthusiastic. I am aware that different constructions have been put on some of these words; but the context seems to me to necessitate those before us. I quote, however, not from the original, but from an extract in the *Remarks on Paradise Lost* by Richardson.⁵³

What the poet has to cultivate above all things is love and truth; what he has to avoid, like poison, is the fleeting and the false. He will get no good by proposing to be "in earnest at the moment." His earnestness must be innate and habitual; born with him, and felt to be his

⁵¹ In a commendatory sonnet published with the *Faerie Queene*, "At whose approach the soul of Petrarch wept, And from thenceforth those graces were not seen."

⁵² In the treatise *On Education*; but the comparison is with logic and rhetoric.

⁵³ Published 1734 (by Jonathan Richardson, father and son).

most precious inheritance. "I expect neither profit or general fame by my writings," says Coleridge, in the Preface to his Poems; "and I consider myself as having been amply repaid without either. Poetry has been to me its 'own exceeding great reward'; it has soothed my afflictions; it has multiplied and refined my enjoyments; it has endeared solitude; and it has given me the habit of wishing to discover the good and beautiful in all that meets and surrounds me."

"Poetry," says Shelley, "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thence forward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it co-exists. The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another, and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause."⁵⁴

I would not willingly say anything after perorations like these; but as treatises on poetry may chance to have auditors who think themselves called upon to vindicate the superiority of what is called useful knowledge, it may be as well to add that, if the poet may be allowed to pique himself on any one thing more than another, compared with those who undervalue him, it is on that power of undervaluing nobody, and no attainments different from his own, which is given him by the very faculty of imagination they despise. The greater includes the less. They do not see that their inability to comprehend him argues the smaller capacity. No man recognizes the worth of utility more than the poet; he only desires that the meaning of the term may not come short of its great-

⁵⁴ See p. 285.

ness, and exclude the noblest necessities of his fellow-creatures. He is quite as much pleased, for instance, with the facilities for rapid conveyance afforded him by the railroad, as the dullest confiner of its advantages to that single idea, or as the greatest two-ideaed man who varies that single idea by hugging himself on his "buttons" or his good dinner. But he sees also the beauty of the country through which he passes, of the towns, of the heavens, of the steam-engine itself, thundering and fuming like a magic horse, of the affections that are carrying, perhaps, half the passengers on their journey, nay, of those of the great two-ideaed man; and, beyond all this, he discerns the incalculable amount of good, and knowledge, and refinement and mutual consideration, which this wonderful invention is fitted to circulate over the globe, perhaps to the displacement of war itself, and certainly to the diffusion of millions of enjoyments.

"And a button-maker, after all, invented it!" cries our friend. Pardon me—it was a nobleman. A button-maker may be a very excellent, and a very poetical man, too, and yet not have been the first man visited by a sense of the gigantic powers of the combination of water and fire. It was a nobleman who first thought of this most poetical bit of science. It was a nobleman who first thought of it, a captain who first tried it, and a button-maker who perfected it.⁵⁵ And he who put the nobleman on such thoughts was the great philosopher Bacon, who said that poetry had "something divine in it,"⁵⁶ and was necessary to the satisfaction of the human mind.

⁵⁵ The nobleman was the second Marquis of Worcester (1601-1677), who in his *Century of Inventions* suggested a machine "for driving up water by fire." The captain was Thomas Savery, who in 1698 patented a machine embodying the use of steam. The "button-maker" was Matthew Boulton, associate of Watt in the practical development of the steam-engine.

⁵⁶ See p. 224.

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